WHAT MAKES
A MONSTER
TWOONY

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✝Author Note✝

Hello!

I'll keep this brief. I wish to give this story a more web novel like feel, which TENDS to lean towards 1.5k words per ep. and P.O.V. switches. That means, although you're on Ch. 50, it's more like Ch. 20 of a traditional novel. Obviously I'll express changes in P.O.V. at the start of a chapter so no worries, but I thought I'd let you all know before you began.

If you like vampire stories, or unique takes on vampires, you can check out my other novel; The Secrets of Lore Seymour.

Status: Completed

Important Note: Hi, please do not refer to my characters as sex positions, "top" or "bottom." They have names. Use them. They aren't toys ^_^ Please respect my request here and on my other stories, thank you.

✝One✝

In the capital of Vashna, all the lords and ladies preside in their carriages of gold and clothes of fine silk. Noble townhouses and high end shops line the streets with glittering jewels and the best of baked goods to enjoy. The Academy of Aena, where priests and knights promise their lives for Goddess Aena, looms in the east. Towering gates and arches with tall spires and glistening stain glass windows give it an air of elegance that's somehow eerily beautiful.

In the background is the palace of King Rufus Baylor, the great white towers and blinding golden terraces are obvious from miles away. The epitome of status and riches, perched behind the clean city streets where prices are high but all can afford after living atop mountains of riches that have been passed on from generation to generation.

I'm about to become a part of this world, but only in the sense that I'm going to work for one of those lords. Most would call me lucky, earning your place as a loyal servant to the nobles gives status higher than a commoner, the pay is great, living in the capital is impossible otherwise, and connections can be made. However, since agreeing to my new position I've been called crazy and "a walking corpse."

That's understandable, seeing as I am not residing in the bustle of city life, but rather taking a long road lined with towering oak trees deep into the west woods to the castle on the hill. Gothic in nature, even from a distance the great spires are visible and the stained glass windows of red, orange, and gold give off a glow of flickering flames in the sun, like a beacon that none will follow. Many describe it as a cursed stain over the city of Vashna, a once beloved structure of House Makai, but now a most hated sight that nearly all wish to see burned to ash, or rather the one within burned to ash.

"You must be Wallace," the butler says that greets me at the front door. He, like the others within working about, is dressed in a black blazer and

matching trousers. The women aren't much different, black dresses with white aprons.

I smile. "Please, call me Wallie."

"My name is Layne, it is a pleasure to meet you, Wallie. I hope you didn't have any trouble getting here. Please come in."

Layne steps aside, allowing me to pass over the threshold. I've never been in such an estate, it is nothing like the houses back home, but we weren't swimming in money, especially after war ravaged our country side.

I admire the exquisite craftsmanship within, breathtaking and otherworldly to me. After all, House Makai has been of noble status for centuries, even once rulers of the empire of Aberia before it became a kingdom ruled by the Baylors. But the Makai family has owned property, wineries, mines, jewelry stores and more longer than any other. Simply money and power piling on top of more money and power until they probably hadn't a clue what to do with it.

As breathtaking on the inside as it is on the outside, the hallways are long and narrow but the ceilings high and arched. Every railing is hand carved so that each detail is as beautiful as the last. There are statues embedded with gems and paintings of old littering the rooms with furniture made from the finest craftsmen. Each room can probably house a family of six, even the bathrooms are immaculate, all of which I see as Layne escorts me to the servants quarters downstairs.

"This will be your room," Layne says, opening one of the many doors in the basement. Inside are two beds pressed to opposing sides along with a desk, two nightstands and two wardrobes. It pales in comparison to the rooms upstairs, but it is more than I had back home. "You will be sharing with Hael. He's been here going on five years so I hope you can learn some tips."

"I'm sure I will. Thank you for escorting me."

"Your attire is already in the wardrobe. Please change. I will inform Higra that you've arrived. She's the head maid and trains all new recruits, but I

warn you, she's rather stern. Don't ever be late, don't complain, and try not to smile."

I raise a brow at the "try not to smile" part because, shouldn't it be the opposite?

But Layne said what he said and he leaves with a quiet bow.

It isn't until he's gone that the truth settles in; I've made it. After a week long of travel, after living my whole life in a troubled town, I've left and I'm here, unsure if here will be any better, but I doubt it can be any worse.

Sighing, I sit my bag atop the bed. All that I've brought are two extra pairs of clothes, a blanket, and a few items from home, such as Dad's books that I cannot read and Mom's cracked teapot. I chuckle upon pulling them out, removing the wrappings to sit the books on my bedside table with the teapot beside them. How out of place it is, but I had to sell everything we owned to pay off Mom's debts and this is all I have to remember either of my parents by.

Opening the wardrobe, I find four clean uniforms, more than expected. I've never worn such nice attire and struggle a bit putting it on. The blazer is a little tight across my shoulders while the pants are loose, but looking in the mirror within the wardrobe, I can't help but feel it looks rather nice. Maybe that's because I've never seen myself in anything other than ripped pants, a tattered shirt, and a hat while on the farm.

Even my hair is done. I used the last few coins I had to get a trim on the way here. The once curly white hair is now settled down on the sides so only the top has volume pushed to the right. The barber said it was all the rave among the servers, gave a sense of responsibility but kept some fun, or something like that. I wasn't really listening, only thinking of the job I barely managed to get thanks to my cousin, Matthias, that Mom kept in touch with while back home and thus I did the same after her passing. He knew of a few openings among the estates, sent letters of recommendation, and now here I am.

I want to laugh. Who would have thought I'd end up at House Makai? If I believed in fate, I'd call it that.

"Don't mess this up, Wallie," I whisper and scowl at how my blue eyes quiver from nerves. My hands follow suit, even more so when there's a knock at the door.

"Come in," I call, turning in time to find an elderly woman step in. She must be Higra, I can tell purely by the scowl on her wrinkled face.

"Wallace," she says, and I'm tempted to ask she call me by my nickname but based on what Layne said, that's probably not the best idea. "We heard great things about you. I hope you live up to expectations."

"I will do my best to serve His Grace."

"Your best?" She smirks. "Your best may not be enough."

That was unsettling, but I expected nothing less. After all, Soran Makai is a vampire, hated and feared by commoners and nobles alike. There are rumors galore, none of them all that great, and it's hard to tell fact from fiction.

Higra suddenly shuts the door. She stands elegantly, hands curled together in front of her and chin held high. But her face is one of apathy while her eyes speak of fearful secrets when she says, "There are rules you must follow while here, Wallace. Lord Makai, as you know, is not like us. You will witness instances that will unsettle you. You may be asked to complete tasks that frighten you, and if you fear what those may be then I suggest you leave now, because if you show hesitation and fear before His Grace you will be leaving as a corpse."

My throat runs dry.

"Do not ask questions. Do not smile. Do exactly as you're told without question or concern. Never show disgust or fear, if you can do that then you'll be just fine."

Higra steps over to me, looking up with her cold brown eyes. They narrow into a glare, one of warning, and although it's unsettling to see it doesn't change my mind.

"Can you follow those rules, Wallace?" She asks.

"Absolutely."

"Very well. Follow me."

✝✝✝

Story Status: Completed.

Hi, please do not refer to my characters as sex positions; top, bottom, uke, seme etc. They have names. Use them. They aren't toys ^_^ Please respect my request here and on my other stories, thank you.

Welcome to the first...episode? I think I will call these episodes since, again, going for a more web novel feel. So, do you like Wallie? Are you excited to meet Soran? What the hell is up with what Higra said? Let me know what you think so far! As the author note said, next update will be Wednesday :)

✝Two✝

Higra guides me through the servant quarters explaining where I may freely go, such as the lounge and the kitchen until we reach upstairs.

"Your duties as a butler are to keep the mansion in tip top shape at all times. There best not be a speck of dust or dirt anywhere, and it must be done in a timely and quiet manner. His Grace does not condone a ruckus and you will see yourself out of a job should you anger him. Understood?"

I nod. "Understood."

"We were informed you worked on a farm, correct?"

"Yes, since I was a child, Ma'am."

"Good, then I trust we may ask for your assistance should something need a quick fix before replacement."

She shows me where supply rooms are or extra blankets if we ever have guests, although from what I've heard I have a sneaking suspicion His Grace rarely has guests; especially not welcome ones.

The remainder of the day is spent with Higra. I'm introduced to other members of the staff that, honestly, are mostly new faces such as myself. Many claim to have been here five years or less and, yeah, that's a bit of a bad sign. With such a well paying job in the capital, what could make so many quit in such a short time? It's a question that only time can answer.

I'm taken step by step through what my days will consist of, which is all of what I expected. After breaking my back over manual labor since I was old enough to walk, this is easy. My clothes and hands are clean by the end of the day. I'm not soaked in sweat. There's a breeze coming from the open windows but no sun beating down on me. The mansion smells of fresh pine rather than manure of a cowfield or the must of a barn.

When I lay awake in bed that evening, I start to miss it though; the farm.

After Dad died during the war against the Treddin army, it was just Mom and me. We didn't own the farm, only tended to it. Mom started gambling and drinking after Dad's death and it was only me to work the fields. The family was losing money and I couldn't keep up with the work or Mom's debts so one thing led to another. I had to sell what I could and leave to find a job that could afford the payments. Now here I am, working at the most hated estate in, arguably, the world. I would laugh if it wasn't also incredibly disheartening.

Hael suddenly snores causing me to snicker at the gurgling sound. He's asleep in his bed across the room.

Hael's older than me, probably his late twenties and a tad odd. He has a quiet demeanor, much like Higra and the few that have been here a while. Guess that's what it's like after you've settled in (if you settle in, it seems). But he has shared some tips, like avoiding the second floor east hallway. That's where His Grace's room is. Although it's obviously cleaned, mostly by Layne and Higra, Hael said to avoid it and hope you're not asked to do it.

It's strange that the whole household fears His Grace but I haven't seen or heard of him all day. Is he mean? Does he mistreat the servants? Or is it simply because of what he is?

After all, he's one of only three vampires in existence. I fear I know little of the other two but Lord Makai's tale is one all of Aberia knows; a common told bedtime story for kids about what becomes of those with too much greed. The tale of Emperor Elyon Makai and The Holy War that began nearly 1,600 years ago.

To be honest, I don't know if I even understand or know the entire story. Dad told me and we weren't exactly educated, not like the royals that can probably recite the war from start to finish. However, I recall the tale Dad told before bed or I asked to hear while sitting by the fire.

Emperor Makai was greedy and twisted. He bathed in riches and blood, but was forgiven for the economy of Aberia flourished with his expansion of

the empire. But his great expansions lessened as his life was coming to an end from illness and his ego was too big to accept that. So with a snap of his fingers, he ordered his Priests of Aena to find the answers to immortality, but Aena was not a Goddess to gift such a feat. The Priests turned to her opposite, Tethros, a God of destruction and chaos to seek guidance and they succeeded, but not for Emperor Makai.

A child was more created than born; Soran Makai, and his soul was imbued with vilis, magic of darkness that has been exiled and shunned from humanity. The empress did not survive child labor for Soran had consumed her blood and organs from within. Emperor Makai could not be saved even with this new information. He died cold and alone while his priests worshipped Soran like a God.

The world grew fearful of what the priests had achieved and the power they now possessed. The Baylor family rose and started a rebellion known as The Holy War that lasted six years until the priests fell. The Baylor family put back together what they could and turned Aberia into a kingdom where they ruled and Soran Makai was left alone. Nothing could be done to him and no one wished to do anything for him.

And that is the tale of how Soran Makai came to be, the vampire I'm now working for. Only time will tell if working for a vampire will be a good or a bad thing.

✝✝✝

Here we are, episode two! Like I said, short chapters especially for me, but I'm interested to see how it works out. Learned some more about Soran Makai, but do you expect the story to be true or is there more to this tale? Are you interested in the world lore? Let me know what you think so far :)

✝Three✝

"Wallie, could you take care of the guest rooms on the second floor west side? Once that's done, you may call it a night," Layne calls into the kitchen, catching me midbite.

"Yes, I'll get right on it!"

"Finish your meal first," he laughs, disappearing to continue his own duties.

I'm quick to do so, finishing the broth in a few quick gulps then I'm on my way to the second floor. I already know what to do, where to go, and how to get it done. A week has already passed and I've come to quite like this job. It's simple, not always easy since I have been called on occasion to bring in or take out new furniture, fix a broken item or two as Higra said, or clean the towering walls of the mansion. Heights aren't my speciality, but I've managed.

There's a certain calmness to the mansion. Everyone moves like a well oiled machine. Work gets done. We move from one job to the next, laugh a bit between in the privacy of the servant quarters and go about our business with little to no interruption.

Oh, and the pay is certainly worth it. After receiving my first paycheck at the end of the night, I'm not sure what to do with it.

"Why don't you go into town?" Hael asks. He's sitting on his bed with an open book in his lap. A pair of glasses are perched on his crooked nose.

"You think I can afford something in town?"

"There are small shops and eateries near South End. Most of us servants spend our spare time there."

"Oh yeah?" I hum, finishing up changing from the usual uniform into trousers to sleep in. "Mind taking me then?"

"I suppose. I would like a new book."

He's going to run out of space. Hael has a trunk beneath his bed full of books and there's more books in his wardrobe than clothes. But that's all I see him do in his spare time so at least he has a hobby. I've never learned to read so I can't relate.

"Hael, can I ask you something?"

"Hmm?"

"Is His Grace not here?"

Hael raises his head with a cocked brow. "Excuse you?"

"I've been here a week and have yet to see him."

"Yes, and that's a good thing. Hope it remains that way a while longer."

"Why?" I ask and Hael's cocked brow turns into an expression of disbelief.

"Do you wish to see him?"

"I wouldn't say wish. I just find it odd to be serving someone I've yet to see."

That's a complete lie, one that Hael doesn't even take notice of.

"Trust me, you don't want to." Hael shivers. "He makes Higra look easy going."

I whistle, that's actually impressive because I think Higra needs to be a captain in the military rather than a head maid. She has spunk and attitude without giving attitude, which is a skill most don't have. And she certainly is stern, I've been whacked over the head a few times because I didn't make the bed well enough or the cups weren't aligned perfectly in the cupboards.

"Is he that cruel?" I ask.

"Cruel?" He snickers. "He's a monster, you'll learn that soon enough."

I bite my lip, holding back the truth that nearly slipped out. Not that Hael would believe me if I told him the story.

"We should stop talking about His Grace. Should he ever hear, we'll find ourselves out of a job at best," Hael says then returns to his quiet reading.

"Right... plans to go out tomorrow after work then?"

Hael nods.

Our conversation came to an end with me flinging myself back onto the bed. It's not that late and I'm not all that tired, but servant life starts as early as farm life does so I roll onto my side in hopes to get some sleep. The idea of heading into town for the first time with money to actually spend helps ease me to sleep after such an unsettling topic.

However, the next day I'm reminded of what Hael said, *"He's a monster, you'll learn that soon enough."*

✝✝✝

The sound of glass shattering is followed by a sudden ear splitting scream, like that of an angry beast, bursting forth from the east wing of the second floor. I'm on the opposite end of the hall to witness it, along with Layne and Elamir. Both look away when a pair of doors swing open. I don't though; I watch as a stranger rushes out with a dark cap pulled low to hide his features. There's blood on his hand.

And maybe I'd have done or said something if not for the shock of seeing the man alone one second then a dark looming figure behind him the next. To say it happened in the blink of an eye would be a lie, it was somehow even faster.

One moment the man is alive and the next Lord Makai has him by the throat, tearing into his flesh in horrendous fashion. I recall father reading

me stories of a vampire's bite in silly tales made up from legends, but the saying is true; reality is stranger than fiction.

When Lord Makai bites, the man struggles as the flesh of his neck is torn to shreds like it is as soft as melted butter. His skin grows pale, eyes wide and mouth agape to let out a shrill scream that chills me to the core.

Then it's over when Lord Makai doesn't release, he simply pulls back so the flesh is ripped from the bone and the stranger's neck snaps with a loud crack. A spray of red follows, coating the corpse that is dropped to the floor and the man that had done it.

My first time seeing Soran Makai here, he's covered in blood.

The deep black of his hair is now twisted and plastered to pale skin. Narrow eyes, fearsome and red, are set into a stern glare as frightening as the twisted scowl permanently etched into his sharp features. His ears are long and pointed, poking out of the curls of his hair, blacker than night itself, while fangs hang over bloody lips. There's a dagger sticking out of the back of his neck. He rips it out with a sickening squelch to drop on the floor.

Lord Makai looks to me and I'm reminded of Higra's words.

"Never show disgust or fear."

That's easier said than done, especially after witnessing a man perish and having to look into the burning red eyes of his killer. An immortal killer at that.

✝✝✝

Early update because I'm going to my mom's tonight, gonna be busy this weekend so, yeah, here ya go! *clears throat* Well, that was a bit unpleasant for Wallie, wasn't it? Did you expect to meet Soran in such a, uh, violent way? And what are your thoughts on him based on the information so far? Would love to hear any theories you've already got ;)

✝Four✝

"What are you doing standing there?" Lord Makai hisses between the blood dripping from his lips, yet somehow the red of his eyes are even more terrifying.

"Clean this up. Now!"

"O-Of course, Your Grace!" I bow, hoping that my stutter is set aside. When he clicks his tongue, I expect a death sentence but thankfully that doesn't happen.

"Layne, remove the body, and you, to my quarters."

I'm assuming "you" is referring to Elamir. When I see her bow next to me, that answers the question. Then Lord Makai walks away, and I make sure not to raise my head until after he's gone.

"A-Are we just going to remove the body and not say anything? What e-even happened?" I whisper to Layne after he brings a sheet and has me help wrap the body. Elamir rushes by with a deep wash bin and a few rags only to disappear into what I'm assuming to be Lord Makai's bedroom.

"Quiet," Layne hisses. "Higra told you, didn't she?"

"Don't ask questions. Do what you're told."

"Yes. Now help me carry this."

Thankfully Layne holds the shoulders while I take the legs. He's already covered, blood soaks the sheet and his clothes. There's blood under his fingernails but he doesn't even flinch. I'm already feeling sick. The smell is enough to churn my gut.

I expect a commotion or some gasps of horror and despair as we walk the halls, but that doesn't happen. As Layne and I are walking through the

mansion with a corpse in a bloodstained sheet, no one so much as passes us a glance. The only thing that gets a look of annoyance is the trail of blood left behind, followed by some mumbling about cleaning up the tracks.

Ok, but the body? Are we not going to discuss? Lord Makai just killed someone, that I'm assuming attempted to kill him first with that dagger (and why? Because everyone knows that doesn't work) but still! Shouldn't we, I don't know, report this or something?

Is this what Higra meant? I would have to see and do things that unsettle me. Carrying a corpse is part of the job description? I never imagined that!

When we go outside, Layne takes me around back to a room with an incinerator.

"Toss him in," he says after turning on the machine that roars to life. My eyes widen but Layne gives me that look; the one that says I'm meant to follow the rules, but the rules are fucked and I am very confused.

"What do you mean? Layne, we—we can't just—"

"What do you think happened, Wallie?" Layne asks with a heavy sigh. Sweat is forming on his brow, same as mine. The room is hot and we just carried a corpse down two flights of stairs so, yeah, we're both exhausted.

"I think Lord Makai killed someone that attacked him."

"Yes, and what will happen if he reports it? The immortal vampire no one likes and all wishes to be dead."

I don't have a response to that, which is response enough.

All know that nothing will happen. No one will care because Lord Makai can't die and, if he could, everyone would be thrilled if an assassin succeeded. So it'll be self defense, out of reason and fear, and no one will probably look into it or care.

"The authorities will be notified, as always, and nothing will be done," Layne says exactly what I was just thinking. "They won't investigate. It

doesn't matter."

"But tossing him out like trash is—"

"Do as you're told, Wallie. If you can't, then leave," Layne says, holding the man by his shoulders and waiting for me to help toss him into the fire.

I don't want to. Even if I can't see him within the sheet, I know he's there. I remember the look on his face, the horror and that split second of pleading with whoever will listen to spare him.

But I have nowhere else to go, and if Lord Makai were anyone different then this man would be a murderer. He knew what he was doing. He knew the risks and his death would have happened either way. And most of all, I know that Lord Makai is not a monster. I've seen that proven before...so that's what I have to tell myself in order to help Layne toss him into the fire.

"Go back to clean up the blood. I'll stay until this is finished."

Oddly enough, I prefer the clean up, so with a quiet nod I do as I'm told without question.

It's a mess. The rug is stained, the wallpaper too. I clean but the smell and stains remain. The once clear water is now red. Even my clothes are ruined and when I wipe the sweat from my cheek with my shoulder, there's blood on my clothes. It's everywhere, and I'm reminded of a time I have been trying to forget since I was a child. So I scrub more, either to clean or wash away the memories, I'm not sure.

"That's enough, Wallace." Higra is standing next to me and it's when I look at her that I notice the sun is down.

Have I been cleaning all afternoon?

"You've done what you can. We will replace the rest. Get yourself some dinner and head to bed." She frowns when she gently pats my head. "You did good today."

That's the first time she's ever said such a thing to me. It's oddly comforting.

"T-Thank you. I'll get going then." My body is sore from moving about the floor all day. I don't have dinner. I can't stomach it, and I take a quick and steaming bath before heading to bed.

Hael is there. I'm reminded when I see him that we were meant to go into town today. He doesn't mention it, but when he looks at me I know that he is aware of what happened.

"I told you," he says with a frown. "He's a monster."

I want to argue that Lord Makai was only defending himself, but the man's death was excessive. Recalling it makes me shiver.

"Care to head to town tomorrow then?" I ask with my back facing Hael as I change.

"Sure, so long as nothing comes up. We can meet out front before lunch."

Even with the promise of seeing town tomorrow, I can't sleep. Hael has no issue with what transpired today, judging by what he said he has probably witnessed it before. He sleeps soundly, snoring soft then loud, while my eyes refuse to shut. When they do, there's only red but I don't know if it's the red of today or the past.

I flip onto my side, staring at the plain light blue wall. I wonder if we can get something in town to put up. The room is so bare. A painting or something would be nice. Mom liked paintings, we had a few that were cheap from the market.

Distracting thoughts aren't all that distracting it seems because I've yet to sleep. My body is tense and I wonder what bothers me the most. The excessive death or the fact that no one cares, about either party. No one cares that someone tried to kill Lord Makai, what must that feel like? Knowing all around you would be pleased if it worked but still hate you for defending yourself.

But slaughtering a man and tossing his body out like trash isn't acceptable either.

I'm simply at a loss, but eventually my body can't withstand the exhaustion. My eyes are heavy. As they close, I know there will be nightmares. Nightmares of home, of fire and screams and blood, but then there's a voice. A gentle voice that calls to me with their outstretched hand, *"Everything is ok. You're safe now."*

The nightmares fade away.

✝✝✝

Hmm, what is this dream about =O And what sort of memories is Wallie trying to forget? Already there's mystery surrounding both characters. What are your theories so far? And how do you feel about the assassins death? Was it excessive or was it what Soran had to do seeing as nothing would have been done if he hadn't?

✝Five✝

Town is as bustling as the day I arrived, only Hael and I are at South End where we actually fit in. There are no townhouses, only small time housing complexes for local shop owners and families of workers of the estate. Commoners walk about either to pick up everyday items for mansions of their lords and ladies, or those like us enjoying their time off. As Hael said, the stores are within our price bracket, ranging from bookstores to eateries to smalltown plays.

I've never seen a play so upon spotting the posters plastered around town, I'm ecstatic even if I can barely read a word of it. I just see a stage, lots of colors, and people on the poster. Somehow I convince Hael to sit and watch the play with me.

A stage is set in South End square that isn't a square but a circle so I never get why it's called a "square." Either way, the white cobblestone path sits among the shops with a fountain of Goddess Aena at the center. Her long hair is carved into stone, billowing behind her while her hand is outstretched towards the sky, water dripping from her open hand to cascade into the pool below. The stage is set up nearby. There are wooden benches, enough to sit at least a hundred with even more crowded about. The show hasn't started yet, so the crowd is chattering away. When I hear the name "Makai," my head turns slightly to peer over my shoulder at the women behind us.

"I heard there has been another death on that wretched monsters estate," hisses one of the women. "My sister works there, said a body was carried out yesterday."

The second gasps. "What? How disgusting!"

"He can get away with murder. I wish the Knights and Priests of Aena would get rid of him already."

"They've been trying for centuries, even King Baylor has set up new laws in hopes to keep the beast's power in check."

"Yet the Makai name is everywhere and he owns almost everything." The first woman turns her chin up. "What a hindrance to our great kingdom, a mockery to our Goddess Aena. If I were him, I'd just lock myself away out of humiliation."

"How can your sister even work there?" The second woman asks with a shiver. "I'd be terrified. What if he were to drain me dry?"

"Perhaps the workers there are lucky then. He got his meal from the dead man so their lives are spared for a bit longer, but my sister doesn't talk about her job when she visits. She's frightened, as she should be."

"But of course, he's a monster. The world would be a better place without him."

This is uncomfortable to listen to. There's almost a part of me that wants to defend Lord Makai, but I bite my tongue.

"Oh! The play is about to start!"

I face the stage just in time to watch the curtains being pulled back and out walks the actors in a story of our king, Rufus Baylor, and how he defeated the Treddin army 14 years ago. If I had known that was what it was going to be about, I wouldn't have come.

The Treddin army comes running into the small city of Chandri. They take the village to use as their primary camp with the villagers becoming hostages and slaves. Gasps of horror and despair ripple through the crowd, some even shout in anger and frustration until King Baylor steps on stage.

The crowd claps and cheers with delight when the battle scenes begin and, in the end, King Baylor impales the evil King Treddin, whose features are grossly exaggerated. His hair is a mess and there's a giant mole on the side of his clearly fake bulbous nose. Even his clothes don't match, he looks a mess, a complete joke, while Baylor is pristine and bright. It's kind of

ridiculous, but the crowd loves it when all come out to take their bow at the end of the performance.

I feel sick after watching it.

"They have that same show every year," Hael sighs afterwards, leading me to the local bookstore. "I don't understand how they still make money."

"People love an epic."

Even if it's filled with lies, not that anyone would listen to a lowly commoner such as myself.

"Sounds like you didn't like it much?"

"Huh?" I hum, looking to Hael with a smile. "Oh no, it was a lot of fun! I've never seen a play before."

"Didn't have any in your hometown?"

"No, I lived out in the country so even when I went to the market it was for work. There was no time to watch."

"Ah, good we came then, but they do it every year so watch out. Sometimes they change the title, probably to trick those like myself that wish to see something new."

I snicker. "Thanks, I'll remember that."

We step into the bookstore seconds later. The shop owner smiles at us, more specifically Hael. He is obviously a regular because the shop owner knows his name and then tells him about some new arrivals he may be interested in. While they chat, I tiptoe around the shop that I can't really enjoy other than the picturebooks or admiring the covers.

As a kid, I desperately wished to learn to read. But seeing my mom work herself to the bone on the farm while my dad switched between farm work and small time military duties made me set aside such dreams. I worked with mom to put food on the table and take a load off her shoulders, seeing

her smile and knowing she got more rest made it worth it. Although, now part of me wonders if I can save up to pay for a small time tutor or maybe even ask Hael. I'd love to read a book, especially when I see how into them Hael is.

"See anything you like?" Hael calls to which I shake my head. He nods then we're off to eat and walk around town some more until it's nearly dark.

I'd be fine with staying out late but Hael is quick to say, "We best head back before it's dark."

"Oh, is there curfew?"

He shakes his head. "No, the road isn't as safe at night."

"The road to the estate? Why not?"

"You saw what happened yesterday, there's always someone wanting to make an attempt at His Grace. Sometimes a poor servant may catch a glimpse and—" Hael runs his finger over his throat.

I gape. "You're joking."

"No, it's happened before. A girl was killed a year ago when some assassins were on their way to attack Lord Makai. I heard he had a dog once too, and it was killed."

Someone killed his dog?! Ok, I hope that bastard had their throat ripped out. They deserve it!

"It doesn't happen often, but I feel more comfortable traveling during the day," says Hael.

"But why?"

"Huh?"

"Why so many attempts? We all know he's immortal."

"So they say," Hael answers with a shrug. "But everyone wants him gone. The Priests of Aena say a vampire's presence is a great calamity that will only give the God Tethros more power, thus bringing further destruction in the future. If you ask me—" Hael looks about to make sure no one is listening then leans in to whisper, "The royals are the ones always sending assassins. No one really knows the true power Lord Makai has so His Majesty is scared."

"Of what?"

"An attempt to take over. Think about it, an army can't even stop a creature like that, and the money he has seems to be endless as well as the fact that he has a claim to the throne. He's of royal blood, condemned or not. If he wanted the throne, he could take it on his own or build his own militia. He's a threat."

"So the royals are trying everything they can to get rid of him, hoping just once for a lucky shot?"

Hael nods, his eyes stating that he, too, thinks it's ridiculous. "Perhaps. We'll never really know. Lord Makai never lets the assassins live so I'm certain he is aware and not that worried about it, which probably frightens the imperial family even more."

I don't know if I'm impressed or worried to hear that. If assassins were constantly out for my head, I'd be frightened all the time. Then again, I have no idea what it's like to be immortal. Thinking about it honestly doesn't sound that great. Even if life is fleeting, I don't know if I like the idea of eternity, more specifically an eternity of being hated.

"It's all hearsay or personal opinions though," Hael tacks on, bringing me back from my thoughts. "There's no telling what he truly feels."

"There surely isn't." I shrug the sudden sorrowful feeling off. "Let's hurry back then. I definitely don't want to be out after dark now."

The sun is setting and by the time we reach the mansion it's dark, which has me sighing in relief. We made it in one piece and are welcomed back by

those we pass on the return to our room. Our day out went well, more than well. Other than what happened yesterday, my time here has been better than expected. It's then I realize I need to thank my cousin, Matthias, except I have no way to contact him other than mail.

While back home I had a friend in town write and read the letters for me since I couldn't do it myself. Here, I haven't told anyone yet that I'm illiterate. Looking to Hael, I wonder if I can ask or if he'd think differently of me. Most of the workers here have been well off enough in their lives to learn. I don't want to come across as...

What? An idiot? I don't' know. I'm just embarrassed, so I don't tell. Not yet anyway. I'll reach Matthias another time.

✝✝✝

Yay, another update! This time Wallie has gone into town and, hmm, what's this about the play? Why do you think he didn't like it? And what do you think of what Hael said about the royal family? Are they the ones behind the attacks? Also, HOW DARE ANYONE ATTACK A DOG! *shakes fist*

✝Six✝

Two days pass without further issue, and it's only on the second day that I see His Grace again. Luckily, there's no blood involved this time.

He's inspecting the replacements in the hall. Higra is with him, watching quietly while he looks over the work. There's no stains or any sign of the struggle from days prior, even His Grace comes across as the everyday man; standing in the hall with his arms crossed in a fine burgundy suit with silver cufflinks. If not for his unnaturally pale skin and the deep red of his eyes, he could blend in with the rest of us.

"It still reeks," Lord Makai says with a face of disgust. When his lips pull back, the tips of his fangs are visible. "Clean it again."

"As you wish, Your Grace." When Higra catches me staring I already know what she's going to say. "Wallace, clean this hall until His Grace is satisfied."

I'm tempted to ask when that will be because even now the hall smells of bleach, but when Lord Makai looks to me out of the corner of his eye, I immediately bow.

"I'll get to it right away, Your Grace."

When I return with cleaning supplies, Lord Makai is gone and I must return to the floor to clean. I have to wear a face mask, the smell of bleach is too overpowering. From time to time, I peer down the hall to the rooms I've never been. I know one is Lord Makai's study, another is his bedroom, but a few more doors remain. Higra and Layne are the only ones to frequently work down there.

When focusing on a task, it's hard to tell how much time goes by or what's around you. So when a pair of silver shoes appear before my eyes, I'm surprised. Slowly raising my head, I go wide-eyed upon finding Lord Makai staring down at me. I didn't even hear him come out of the office.

"My Lord." I bow my head but remain on the floor since, I don't know, I'm kneeling and that's what most do in front of a noble, right? Who knows.

I remove the mask so my voice isn't muffled when I ask, "Do you need anything?"

"No."

He's staring at me. The look is neither cold nor warm, more an observation. I wouldn't say I'm unsettled or comfortable because I have no idea why, especially when we're this close. From here I notice the sharpness of his cheekbones and the pointed tips of his ears and heart shaped face. I'd say that's not very fitting, but he pulls it off well. Not that I would ever have the guts to say that out loud.

I offer up a smile in the awkward silence until I remember I'm not supposed to smile. I shake my head to remove it. Smiling is a sort of knee jerk reaction to me at this point.

"Leave," he finally orders.

"The hall no longer reeks then?"

He nods, but twists his nose for some reason. It isn't until he glances to my hands that I realize why. I'm bleeding. I scrubbed until my hands were raw. Great, so I scrubbed away the smell of blood only to replace it with my own.

"I'm deeply sorry, Your Grace. I probably just ruined the whole job. I can request—"

"No." He interrupts and waves his clawed hand. "Just leave."

He walks away without another word, going downstairs for some reason. Obviously I don't ask. I'm more than happy to be done cleaning for the day and now that I'm aware of my hands, the slight sting settles in. So I clean up my workspace and request some bandages from Elamir who happily helps wrap my injuries.

When Hael hears that I had to clean the second floor hallway, he snorts but also seems apologetic.

"That must have been rough," he says. "You've spent too much time there."

"Doing the same thing. I've cleaned that hall so much I'm surprised the floors haven't been bleached away."

"Be more careful. If you need to pass through the second floor, do it in secret to avoid another meeting."

I don't think I mind as much as Hael does, but I plan to take his advice. It's probably best to avoid the second floor. I wouldn't say I'm scared of Lord Makai, but I'm not friendly with him either, obviously. He's the lord of the house, my employer, and most people don't want to be around their employer.

But it seems that the world does not agree with me because the next day I find myself receiving new orders from Higra, "Lord Makai wishes to speak with you in his office, Wallace. Go to the kitchen and take up his afternoon tea, immediately."

"Ah, is...is this about the hallway? Did I not clean well enough?" I ask, but Higra narrows her eyes, which tells me not to ask, just do it.

Damn, come on, throw me a bone! Did I do something wrong?

While getting Lord Makai's tea (vampires drink tea? You learn something new everyday), I think over what happened yesterday. I did all my usual duties and cleaned the hall as I was instructed. Lord Makai was even the one that let me leave! Although I did probably get my own blood on the floor, but the hall still smells like bleach this morning so I had to have covered up the smell! Shit, what's going on?

I can't come up with an answer by the time I make it to Lord Makai's office, and there's no turning back. I must do as I'm instructed so I knock hesitantly.

"Come in."

His deep voice puts me on edge.

I push open the doors to find Lord Makai seated at his desk with Layne standing at his side. The room is as pristine and immaculate as the rest of the mansion. The left and right wall are made up nearly completely of books. There are cupboards on the bottom and small knick knacks scattered throughout the shelves. In the center of the room is a round coffee table with two deep green loveseats on either side.

Then there's a wide and tall window located directly behind Lord Makai's dark brown desk. It casts the room in warm sunlight since the dark green curtains are tied back. There's even a breeze coming in from the doorway that leads out onto a terrace. A more than comfortable room, as it should be, seeing as Lord Makai is here quite often.

There are stacks and stacks of paper littering his desk. He's reading over some now, scribbling away before handing them off to Layne. He says something, but it's a quiet whisper. Layne bows and leaves with the papers, offering up a smile to me before he stepping out the door. I hope that's a good sign.

"Would you like me to sit your tea on the desk?" I ask since I have no idea if he wants it anywhere near his work.

"Obviously not."

Ok, well that answers that, so I immediately place the tray on the coffee table then wait patiently. Higra said he wants to speak to me, about what, I'm not sure. The longer I wait the more nervous I get.

Finally, Lord Makai sets aside whatever work he has to acknowledge me, only I would prefer he continue working. It's the same gaze as yesterday, observation and nothing more. That's better than hate or annoyance, but certainly more confusing.

"Do you need me to get you anything else, Your Grace?" I ask, uncertain if Higra misspoke and he only requested I bring his afternoon tea. Although that's usually Higra's job so I don't know why he'd want me to do it.

Then Lord Makai asks a question that I'm uncertain if I wish to answer.

"Have we met before?" He rests his elbows on the desk and his chin atop his folded hands. "The scent—" he glances to my hands. "Was familiar."

Ah, so that's why he was staring. It's been a long time so it's not surprising he didn't recognize me. I was only 8 then, it's been 14 years, although I'm shocked he remembers the scent of someone's blood after so long. I never planned to bring up the truth, but now I see I can't keep this secret.

"I must admit I'm surprised you remember," I respond. "The short answer is yes, we've met before, Your Grace."

"Give the longer answer then."

I'm nervous, wondering exactly what this means. If he discovers the truth, am I out of a job? Will he even care? But it's too late to back out now and if I lied it'd probably be worse.

"You know the story of Chandri, don't you?" I ask, although I know the answer. By the way he tenses, I doubt he has any desire for someone to speak of the tale that has been kept secret by all.

"When the Treddin army broke through the frontlines and stationed themselves in Chandri, they took villagers as hostages to work as slaves for their army. King Baylor came to fight, slaying the generals and King Treddin himself thus ending the war while also saving the villagers, so the story has been told."

He scowls, but doesn't tell me to stop so I continue the story, the true story.

"I saw a man on the battlefield with the true warriors; low level militia made up of commoners sent to die. The stranger with red eyes was the true victor, slaying King Treddin and setting the villagers free, myself being one

of them. I was too scared to move when that stranger found me chained up, hungry, and cold, but he held out his hand, told me everything would be ok and that I was safe. He didn't leave my side for three days, until I was safely returned home, but that man never got credit for what he did, and I never got the chance to thank him for it."

And that man is the so called monstrous vampire, Soran Makai, watching me with a silent stare.

After witnessing the death of that man days ago, assassin or not, I'm troubled and uncertain about Lord Makai, but remembering my three long months of hell that he rescued me (and many others) from makes me want to forget it ever happened. Because it wasn't just me and the villagers that were saved, but also the soldiers sent to die against the Treddin army. They would have been wiped out against a military of that size without Lord Makai's assistance.

I'm not sure how he feels about it either. He's not saying anything. Maybe he thinks I'm lying, but I know I'm not mistaken. He's kind of easy to spot. Even he asked if we met before, implying that he believes we have.

"Ah, and I didn't purposely come here to work because of that!" I quickly explain upon realizing that, maybe, he thinks I did. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing, but I rather make myself clear. "A relative of mine works for House Allani, and when he heard I was looking for a place to stay and a new job he wrote letters of recommendation, which is how I got here. I had no idea. I just accepted it."

Lord Makai actually makes a face, a slightly amused but almost concerned and annoyed type of face; something out of a children's book honestly. It leaves me a little speechless because, again, not sure what it means.

"Even after learning who you would be working for, you accepted the job?"

I nod eagerly, which somehow worsens his shocked expression.

"Are you an idiot?"

I bite my lip. That's clearly not a question I'm meant to answer but I give it a shot. "Is there a problem? Do you not like me being here? I've been doing all my work to the best of my abilities."

His eyes clench shut when he rubs his temple, clearly annoyed, but I'm not sure why.

"What is your name?" He asks. I'm a little hurt he doesn't remember, but I cut him some slack.

"Wallace, but I prefer to go by Wallie."

"Wallace, have you told anyone about this?"

I quickly shake my head. "Even if I did, I doubt anyone would believe me."

"True. Should King Baylor hear of it, you may find yourself in an awful predicament."

My eyes widen because I never thought about that. Living in a small town that people only heard of from the stories probably wasn't much of a threat to King Baylor. But knowing a survivor that is aware of, and witnessed the truth, now working in House Makai, which he wishes to remain seen as a monster and nothing else, may unsettle him. He wouldn't...kill me or anything, right? Seriously, no one would believe me if I said anything!

"Do not speak of what happened again, to anyone. If you do, I'll rip out your tongue."

Huh?

"Bring me more tea. It's cold now."

I'm sorry, are we ignoring the threat of ripping out my tongue? Ok, everyone here is crazy, but I...well, I don't know. I'm going to do my job, I guess?

"Y-Yes, right away, Lord Makai!"

He's glaring at me. "Don't shout."

"Ah, my apologies."

Turning away, I'm about to grab the tray when I bite my lip, uncertain if I should go through with the possibly life ending idea in my head. Lord Makai looks to me; probably only because I haven't left yet. Judging by his narrowed gaze, he's about to ask why or yell at me, but I put a stop to that by swiftly kneeling.

"I know I am not meant to speak of it again, but before I go I wish to thank you." I bow and press my forehead to the floor, hoping this is not a tongue ripping out offense. "For saving the soldiers, the villagers, and myself, even if I don't know why you helped, I honestly don't care. While many don't know the truth, I do, and I'm forever grateful for it. Thank you, Your Grace."

Before Lord Makai can respond, or I die of embarrassment, I take the tray to get the hot tea as instructed. My thanks must not be a good or a bad thing because when I return, he says nothing. I leave the tea, excuse myself, and that's the end of it.

To be honest, I don't know how I feel about being discovered. I managed to thank the man that saved me, even if it didn't seem he wanted to be thanked. But I still must keep the truth a secret from everyone else, and that's annoying.

✝✝✝

The truth has finally been revealed! Did you catch onto the clues left leading up to this? Soran rescued Wallie in the past, which is why Wallie sees him as more than just the big bad vampire. And now we know why he didn't like that play, because it was a lie. Why did Soran help and why do you think that truth is hidden? Will this affect their relationship or not?

✝Seven✝

"What did Lord Makai want to talk about?" Janein asks, one of the many maids of the estate that probably heard through the grapevine that I was suddenly called.

"I got a bit of a scolding for my cleaning job yesterday, but he let me off with a warning."

"Really?" Janein gives me a once over. "No broken bones or anything?"

"Has he done that before?"

"Yeah."

What?! Why would he do that?!

Janein never explains though, only goes on to say, "But I guess he's probably in a much better mood. The next few days he should be, at least."

"What makes you say that?"

"He fed."

My stomach twists at the memory that I definitely was trying very hard to forget because I haven't even thought of it.

"Does he...feed often?" I whisper, lifting the mattress to pull the sheets out.

Janein and I are cleaning one of the guest bedrooms that I doubt anyone has used in years, but Higra wasn't joking. There's no dust or dirt even in the unused rooms.

"I'd say around once every two months? Sometimes more, if something happened. If that man succeeded in getting away then Lord Makai would need to feed swiftly or the wound would take forever to heal. And he

definitely needed it, otherwise that knife never would have reached him. Since he fed though, he's probably in a better mood. You can tell when he needs a drink." Janein leans over the bed to whisper, "He gets extra cranky and yells about everything."

"Thanks for the warning, but if it's once every two months, what—how does he?" I don't know how to phrase this, but Janein understands.

"Feeding doesn't kill anyone, not unless he wants it to. Usually a prostitute is called, y'know, so he gets a two in one deal."

"Wow, that's quite the way of putting it."

"How else was I meant to explain it?" Janein flushes with embarrassment. She brushes a few strands of green hair behind her ear. "Let's not talk about that. It's weird."

"You brought it up."

"You asked."

"You could have left that part out."

Janein groans. "Whatever, I need to take the linens to the laundry. Can you finish up in here?"

I nod and Janein leaves shortly after, leaving me to my own devices and thoughts.

So feeding doesn't kill the person? After what I saw, I can't imagine how. Then again, if I was stabbed in the back of the neck I'd be pretty pissed too.

And a prostitute is sent? Are they ok with that? I doubt it, but the pay is probably insane; that's the only way I can imagine one agrees to come. But thinking about it really is weird. He's our boss.

Yeah, I'm gonna forget I learned that.

Just as I finish up the room, Higra appears. "Wallace."

"Yes?"

"Your suit was ruined the other day, and a few others are in need of replacements so an order was made. Take this into town and pay for the new ones." She hands me an envelope that I peer into. It's full of cash; cash that no one in their right mind would attempt to take. "A carriage is already waiting for you out front. The driver knows where to go."

"So I just need to pick up an order?"

"Yes. When you return, Layne will tell you who to take them to. Now get going."

I scurry off immediately because making Higra wait is a crime that I rather not commit. Besides, I don't mind getting out of the estate. Having a driver rather than walking is a plus too. I've never been in a carriage!

It's much more spacious than expected. Although this clearly isn't the duke's, it's still a wooden carriage with cushioned seats. The ride is smooth all the way into town and I can look out the windows at passing shops. Although I'm nothing more than a butler, I feel kind of lord like in here. If only I had a top hat!

The moment I step into the shop, the keeper is at my side. Her golden hair is pulled back into a tight bun and she's smiling, but her eyes do not share the same enthusiasm.

"You must be from Lord Makai's estate. Are you here to pick up the uniforms?"

"Yes, I have the payment here."

"Wait one moment please. The order is in back." She scurries away, seeming so thrilled to retrieve the uniforms. Only she makes a mistake and leaves the backdoor open just a crack. From here I notice the scowl on her face when she picks up the uniforms. Something tells me she's grumbling about "that no good vampire," but then she smiles merrily once more and returns.

"Here they are!"

"Thank you so much." I hand her the money and she passes over the boxes.

"You must be new. I haven't seen you before," she says in a sweet tone so fake I almost question if it isn't and she's just terrible at her job.

"Ah, yes, my name is Wallie. I've been on the estate for almost two weeks."

"It's nice to meet you Wallie. My name is Beatrix and I wish you the best of luck. Please tell Lord Makai that we are grateful for his patronage and will happily give another discount for the next order."

"I'll make sure to pass it on."

Our interaction ends there. But I peer back into the shop once in the carriage. Beatrix is at the counter counting the money once more, but she's frowning again. Her shoulders slump forward and she shivers before taking the money to the back.

So the shops kiss up to Lord Makai but hate him as much as everyone else? Guess being a vampire is ok so long as you have the money. What a load of hypocrites, smiling like that—

"Don't smile."

All of a sudden, I understand that rule, and I desperately wish I hadn't found out.

Don't smile. In other words, don't kiss up to Lord Makai when you're actually scared of him. Don't smile like you enjoy his presence when you really don't. Don't act like a friend when you're just another that would stab him in the back if you could.

To Lord Makai, a smile is probably more of a threat or a cold reminder that no one really means it.

Thinking that makes my stomach hurt. The ache doesn't lessen even after I return and take the garments to their rightful owners. But it's not like I can

do anything. The servants here are fearful of Lord Makai. I can't deny that I'm not either (just a little), even if I'm grateful for what he did. No one will change, not when His Grace is what he is, a monster they do not want nor understand.

Idiot, why am I even thinking about it? Of course a lowly commoner like myself can't help. Wallowing over it won't help either, it is what it is and I'm not here to be Lord Makai's friend anyways. I'm here to work so that's what I'll do, and I follow the rules because now I know the truth and I know it's for the best.

With my new commitment, the days turned into weeks then, in the blink of an eye, three months have passed.

I've learned what others mean by Lord Makai's mood swings. He certainly isn't the friendliest of people, although...to be perfectly honest, I certainly can't blame him.

There were further assassination attempts, which always shocked me. Once poison was slipped into Lord Makai's drink but a worker was unlucky enough to sneak a sip before Higra took it upstairs. The young man dropped almost instantly, convulsing on the floor until silence.

Then an arrow came through Lord Makai's window, or so I heard. The window had to be replaced and Lord Makai tracked down the perpetrator before he even left the estate. When he returned, he was once again covered in blood, eyes brighter than stars in the sky. It was quite the sight.

I started to understand why people left. With the attacks on Lord Makai, we are at risk too, but seriously, when will they learn? It's ridiculous!

Anyways, he does get really moody when he needs to feed. So much so that he randomly shouts at servants for something as simple as walking too loud. Once a girl dropped a tray of food just outside his office and she was fired on the spot (but I have a sneaking suspicion she caused trouble before because Higra kept saying she was waiting for it to happen).

Ah, I did witness a bone breaking incident. A butler had been stealing from the estate for some time. How Lord Makai found out, I don't know, but he showed up before the guy left and back handed him so hard his nose broke. Not gonna lie, I didn't feel bad for him. You shouldn't steal, asswipe.

We've also had one very weird, but also very powerful guest; the Head Priest of Aena, Lord Reiner Movell. Essentially, he's the right hand to King Baylor, which makes me believe what Hael said. King Baylor is keeping an eye on Lord Makai. The priest always smiled, even with Lord Makai cursing at him constantly. He stayed for a few days, but it ended with Lord Makai literally throwing him out.

I only knew because I was the one cleaning the High Priests' room on the second floor, which he insisted to be on. When I stepped out, I saw the office doors open and Lord Makai launch Lord Movell like he was shot from a catapult all the way down the hall. He ended up denting the wall! But all he did was laugh, dust himself off then leave with a smile. Honestly? It was a little funny, especially since Lord Movell didn't seem to mind and, by this point, I'm used to it.

And I haven't been bothered by Lord Makai since. He never asked to speak with me again and the only time I see him is when he happens to be out of his room or office, which is a rare sight. Little attention is paid to us servants (save for the occasions when one, y'know, dies—or there's a crime like the thieving incident). From time to time our work is inspected and someone gets a good snarling followed by a heinous threat, but that's the extent of his interactions. He's a lot busier than I thought and does leave the mansion frequently to check in on business, but it seems I can't avoid him forever because, once again, Higra comes to me with new orders.

✝✝✝

Decided to give an extra update this week since I'm so far ahead. You'll get another on Saturday! :) So we've learned how Soran feeds **le two in one deal lol And also see even more reason for Soran to be so distant. Not exactly welcome anywhere, poor guy D: But. hmm, the High Priest paid a visit. Do you find this peculiar? Will we see him again? And what are these new orders Higra is about to give, hmmm?**

✝Eight✝

"I'll be what?" I ask wide-eyed. Hael mirrors my expression, sitting on his bed with a book that slips from his fingers into his lap.

"You will be joining Lord Makai on a business trip to observe the mines of Isabe," Higra repeats angrily because she hates repeating herself but she tends to cut me some slack. I've heard that she really likes my work ethic so I guess I've gotten some brownie points! But maybe that's a bad thing because why else would she come to me for this job?

"Doesn't Layne usually go with His Grace?"

"Layne has been given paternity leave."

Hold up...what?

"Layne has been an excellent worker and Lord Makai has been gracious enough to give him time off to spend with his wife and their first child. Layne and I discussed and agreed that you would be the best fit to travel with His Grace in his stead. Is that a problem?"

Judging by Higra's tone, it doesn't matter if it's a problem because this isn't a request. It's an order. After all, I'm not meant to ask. Just do as I'm told.

But traveling with Lord Makai? That probably means we'll be alone together a lot. He's not a conversationalist and I struggle in completely awkward and silent situations. What am I even meant to do on a trip?

"I wouldn't say it's a problem," I answer nervously. I catch Hael shaking his head out of the corner of my eye. He definitely thinks it's a problem, cool, technically I feel that way too, but saying no isn't an option. "Wouldn't it be better if you went? I've never personally served His Grace."

"Old or not, a woman traveling with His Grace would not look good. You won't leave for a further two weeks. During this time, I will teach you what

you must do while on the trip. Serve His Grace well if you wish to keep your job."

"Of course, absolutely, I'll definitely...do my best."

Higra rolls her eyes. It isn't until her footsteps fade in the distance that Hael looks to me and says, "It was nice knowing you."

I throw a pillow at him, which he easily dodges.

"I'm actually going to die on this trip." I sigh and fall back onto the bed, kicking my legs childishly. "Why me?!"

"Higra likes you."

"Why?"

"You're a good worker."

"Thanks, but fuck you."

Being a good worker is meant to give rewards, like a raise, not more work for the moody vampire overlord. I don't want to go on a trip. Why does he need someone to go? Wherever he's staying, shouldn't they have their own workers? He's probably going to make me hold his coat or some shit. It'll be so boring and he'll be so moody. I don't wanna! Why can't he be like the other lords that just hire someone to check for them? Suppose if he did that, he would never leave the mansion. Not like he has friends to visit...when I think like that it even makes me depressed. Wow.

"I guess...it'll be cool to see the mines?" I say more to myself than Hael, who snorts in response.

"It's a dangerous hole in the ground, especially during winter. What about that is interesting?"

"I've never been to Isabe."

At least Hael nods at that.

"It's a big town thanks to the mines. I imagine we'll stay in a hotel, even if I'm in the servant quarters so traveling is a perk, yeah?"

"You're trying really hard to convince yourself that this is ok." Hael laughs. "Keep at it, but it won't actually change anything."

"Your words hurt me."

Hael shrugs. "Take notes with Higra. Although Lord Makai agreed to your appointment, that doesn't mean he'll cut you any slack. Layne has been a loyal servant here for twenty years."

Twenty years?! That has to mean he was a teenager when he started. He's been with Lord Makai that long? Wait—

"How long has Higra been here then?" I ask.

"Around forty years, I think?"

I gape. If Lord Makai is truly as bad as everyone says he is, which by my observations he's not, then why would both Higra and Layne have been here for so long? Most of the workers here last around five years or less. Higra and Layne though, they have been here the longest for sure and that confuses me.

Sure, the guy is cranky and scary, but he hasn't done anything cruel...other than killing in self defense. What my point is, I'm really starting to think people just hate him because of the vampire thing over everything else. Otherwise, Higra and Layne probably would have left by now. They certainly could find another noble to serve with all their experience.

Maybe that's a good sign, or Layne and Higra are simply insane. So long as I pay attention to Higra's instructions and remember what to do, the trip should be fine.

The following week Higra does as she said and teaches me how to work for Lord Makai while away. I am informed we will be at a hotel that will have staff on hand so things like laundry or cleaning will be done by them.

However, I am tasked with preparing snacks and beverages. Apparently he refuses to accept anything from outside his staff. When I ask why, Higra glares at me again. I get it, no questions, but I'm curious. It's weird! The hotel has a cooking staff that will not only brew some hot tea but also bring it up, so why me?

Obviously she doesn't explain and goes on to express that I'll carry luggage or, as expected, his damn coat. If he needs an errand ran, that'll be me, or if he wishes to have a letter sent. I'm there for him to order around, as is my job already, but it is a bit nerve wracking. There are a few things Higra brings up, certain new rules.

I will meet the head of the mine and possibly other aristocrats that may have business there. Higra teaches me how to properly stand in their presence, bow, speak, and set a table. I am not to speak in meetings or address nobles prior to them speaking first. So many rules that are taught over and over again (I do know some of the basics though) while I'm wishing I could take note of them, but I can't.

To rub it in, when the first week comes to an end and Higra expresses that I'll be practicing by attending to Lord Makai's needs for the next week, she hands me a sheet of paper. I stare at the scribbled words that mean nothing to me when she says, "I've made a few notes for you to remember. Study this, take it with you and take some of your own over the week."

I slip the paper into my pocket, trying my best to keep a straight face. "Thank you, I'll do that."

"Now, brew Lord Makai's tea and take it to his room."

His bedroom? I've never been in there. For some reason I imagine him sleeping in a coffin. Guess it isn't some reason, that's what all the old fairy tales say about vampires. Although they were made by writers that probably never met a vampire. Then again, who knows? Maybe one managed to ask. I'm just trying to distract myself from the fact that I'll be waking Lord Makai. Something tells me he's not a good morning person.

At least Higra is with me to make sure I do a good job. Kind of late to check because if I don't pan out well, who will go?

Knocking at Lord Makai's door, I announce that I've brought his tea. A quiet hum mixed with a growl follows. Not surprising.

When the door opens, there's no light save for that coming from the hallway. The room is pitch black, the deep purple curtains drawn to block the sun. Stepping inside, there's a living room first, a giant fireplace with two couches and a coffee table with bookshelves and end stands along with a terrace, much like his office. To the right is the actual bedroom, one step up. It's hard to move about when there's no light.

Higra is waiting by the doorway, watching with a quiet gaze as I walk to Lord Makai's bedside. The bed is massive, far too big for one person. Even without light I see the soft shine of black silk and a purple comforter wrapped around his form. His eyes are glowing bright red, like a cat in the dark. I barely make out that his hair is a complete mess. But he combs it back with his hand, sitting up afterwards with a low groan so the blankets coil around his bare waist.

"Your tea, Lord Makai."

I hold out a cup. His hand is cold as ice and nails so long they clink against the glass. But he takes the steaming cup and sips from it while I wait patiently to hear if it's to his satisfaction. Higra said it was ok. Seeing as he doesn't immediately spit it out, that's a good sign.

"Would you like me to open the curtains?" I ask.

He nods.

I head over to pull back the drapes, allowing the morning sun to come in. Finally the room is lit and maybe I'm too curious not to try and glance around, only to be disappointed. The room is rather...plain? It's massive and has furniture but there are no paintings or signs of someone living here. Make the bed and it'd look like every other guest bedroom, only bigger. There's no personality at all.

Even in my bedroom I've managed to purchase a painting and put it up. I found one that reminded me of the farm and Hael has so many books that it's obvious an avid reader is in the room. But Lord Makai? There's nothing. It's bare and dead.

"Aren't you meant to be doing something?" Lord Makai asks, causing me to spin on my heel to find him leaning back in bed with an empty cup.

His eyes are narrowed, same as Higra. Seems I took too long being nosy.

I flush a bit, making sure to keep my eyes on his face. He's not wearing a shirt and he's far more chiseled than I expected...not that I was thinking about it before. Whatever, my boss is half naked and he needs to put a shirt on.

"Right, I'm sorry." I bow nervously and rush back to his side to pour another glass.

Nobles are so lazy, and judging by how long I have to wait by his bedside for him to finish the pot, I can tell this is going to be an obscenely long trip.

✝✝✝

N'aw, Wallie, don't lose hope yet! I'm sure the trip will be fiiiiiiine, tehehehehehehehh...hehe! What do you think will happen on the trip? Will Soran and Wallie get closer or nah? ;D

✝Nine✝

Lord Makai is a pain.

Not literally, he doesn't cause physical pain, but he's mentally exhausting.

Our "practice" week has nearly come to an end and I already want the trip, that hasn't even started yet, to be over. From morning until night, I am his errand boy. There's tea in the morning where I wait for him to finish because apparently he can't pour his own cup and snacks throughout the day. I help with his cufflinks and his coat because nobles can't do that themselves either. Then I help in his office, either clean or retrieve anything he needs whether it's a book from the shelf, another cup of tea, or sending out letters. All that seems ok, right?

Well it isn't the job that bugs me! It's the person.

Lord Makai is not a conversationalist. He glares, he snarls, and he reprimands. When I do something well, there is no thanks or compliment, but if I mess something up even a little I get the signature " *do you want to die* " snarl accompanied by some form of a lecture. Perhaps Higra learned her ways from him because the two are kind of similar. She yelled at me for the teacups not being straight in the cupboard and Lord Makai whacked me on the back of the head with a rolled up piece of paper when I didn't set the table right for lunch. The only mistake was the knife was on the wrong side!

And he's rude! He doesn't talk. I made the mistake of attempting conversation and only received two words, *"Be quiet."*

Not as a request, but an order spat out between clenched teeth. The only sign of an emotion other than pure annoyance wasn't even good. I stubbed my toe on the side of the couch once and hopped around while biting my lip to keep quiet. But it wasn't the pain that was the worst part, it was looking up to find Lord Makai watching me with a devilish grin.

"Know that if you don't do well on this trip it won't just be you that's reprimanded," Lord Makai warns over lunch on our last day before the trip. "Higra is the one that taught you, after all."

So that's two threats, one involved ripping out my tongue and the other is threatening me by threatening Higra. What a pleasant fellow. I'm tempted to mention that people may like him more if he had a better attitude but, honestly? That's a lie. They wouldn't, so I cut him some slack.

He's still super annoying. I used to look up to him when I was a kid after the whole saving my life thing. Now I'm a tad bit disappointed, and I wish I could get over those feelings of being grateful so I can just hate him.

"If you're so worried about my performance, why not bring Higra?" I ask even if she has already explained as to why.

"You must really be an idiot," he responds, leaning back into the couch after setting his meal aside.

I've learned he eats normal food too. I wonder if it actually does anything though? Or does he just like the taste? Does it even have a taste to him? If I could ask, I would.

"I'm not nearly as well educated as you, Your Grace, so I fear in comparison I may be an idiot," I respond.

"Do you wish for me to go through with ripping out your tongue?"

Oh, I have been threatened again. I should probably stop.

"My apologies." I pour another cup of tea. "Why did you give Layne leave when the trip was so close? It would have been much easier to take him."

"You ask a lot of questions."

I've asked two, but ok.

"He should have been able to attend, but the baby was premature," he actually answers. "You were recommended, although I'm beginning to think

that was the wrong choice."

Really? Because I put the knife on the wrong side and happened to get some tea on a blank piece of paper two days ago? You...

"I will make sure to better myself, Your Grace. I promise I will serve you to the best of my abilities and more while on this trip."

"Of course you will, Wallace."

Why does he sound sarcastic? He's so hard to please.

"Your Grace, I really would appreciate it if you called me Wallie."

And there's the snarl, only this time I'm lifted off the ground. Red smoke forms around Lord Makai's figure. He snaps his fingers and the doors open just in time for him to wave his hand and I'm chucked out like a rag doll with a surprised shout. The doors slam just as I drop to the floor, at least I didn't slam into the wall, but still, he threw me out, literally! What a jackass.

I take that as meaning I can go? Just to make sure, I knock and ask, "Do you need me for anything else, Your Grace?"

The door rattles with his shout. "Leave!"

I'm impressed with myself. A week ago I would never have the guts to knock or speak with him, but now? It kind of feels like associating with a stray cat. They let you get close, petting is off limits though, and they'll scratch or bite if you try, but there's no horrible consequences, although based on what's been said around the mansion that could change. Whatever, so far he's only been annoying.

Since I'm off babysitting duty, I head to dinner. I've felt almost like a celebrity this last week since the moment I step into the kitchen all eyes are on me. Everyone always asks what it's like working side by side with Lord Makai. Layne and Higra are always the ones to do it and they don't exactly

share their work. I try not to either, but it seems my awkward smiles give it away.

"He's awful, isn't he?" Janein sighs heavily while she eats with Hael, Elamir and myself. "Your face says it all."

"I wouldn't say awful. He's just—"

"Moody?"

I take a bite of a buttery biscuit. My friends chuckle.

"He hasn't hurt you though, has he?" Elamir asks nervously.

"No, although he did literally throw me out of the room earlier."

The girls gasp and Hael chokes on his drink.

"I'm fine though! I don't mean like a bad throw?" That makes no sense. "It was magic, lifted me off the floor and bam, out of the room."

"Still, what if you had gotten hurt?" Janein gasps.

"That probably would have been better. It'd get you out of traveling with him," Hael points out, which immediately has me regretting being so nice earlier. If I had been mean, he may have thrown me further.

"You're right." I gape. "I should have done something bad in order to get out of it."

Elamir rolls her eyes while Janein giggles then says, "If you had done that, he would have just fired you."

"True."

"You're leaving early tomorrow, aren't you?" Elamir asks.

I nod.

"Good luck. Hopefully you're not completely miserable by the time you get back."

Everyone laughs save for me. Sure, sure, I see how it is. Laugh at my pain. One of these days I hope they get this job instead and we'll see if it's still funny then!

That night I barely get a wink of sleep due to nerves. Having Higra around has made this week easier. If I had questions, I just asked her. Although from time to time she'd growl and ask why I didn't read the notes she gave me. Obviously I never told her the truth. I'm still saving up with the hope of getting a private tutor even if it takes me a while to do so. Once the trip starts though, I'll be on my own.

When morning comes, I'm not ready, but there's no backing out. I'm up before Hael to prepare Lord Makai's tea and make sure everything is ready to go. Higra does help. We're outside speaking with the drivers. Lord Makai's luggage is packed onto the back of the carriage. Everything is in order and we're meant to leave as soon as Lord Makai is ready.

Higra orders me to do well before, surprisingly, wishing me luck. All the luck in the world probably can't save me from this fiasco of a trip though, but I appreciate everyone's effort! And when the time comes to leave, I'm met with a new dilemma that nearly has my eyes popping out of my skull.

"What exactly is this, Your Grace?" I ask after opening the brown package Lord Makai handed me.

He's tethering a sword to his waist, which only worries me more. He has a sword and now he has given me a dagger. Not a small rusty one either, but rather a well crafted piece of cold steel with a blade longer than my hand. The handle is pure black, simple but effective, able to be put away in a dark leather pouch.

"A dagger, obviously," he answers.

"Yes, yes I can see that, but why are you giving this to me?"

"Because you may need it."

"W-What?"

"You've been here long enough to know that answer."

Then he leaves, brushing by me like he didn't just admit that by going with him my life is in danger and he gave me a dagger to protect myself. Me, someone that has never used a dagger for anything other than cooking or farm work.

"Wallace!"

I jump and nearly drop the knife, somehow fumbling it in my grasp. Good thing it's back in the pouch. Nervously, I tie it to my belt, hidden beneath my heavy jacket, then grab Lord Makai's briefcase and coat in order to meet with him downstairs.

"My apologies, Your Grace, I'm coming!"

Higra is waiting at the front doors with a scowl. Lord Makai is there as well. He holds back his arms for me to slip his coat on. Higra is making sure to watch as I dust off the nonexistent dirt and flatten out any possible wrinkles that also definitely don't exist. That does the trick because she turns away from me and bows.

"Have a safe journey, Your Grace."

"If there is anyone slacking simply because I am on business, fire them."

"Of course, My Lord."

I open the front door, shivering at the burst of cold air. Lord Makai isn't affected, at least I don't think he is. Does he feel cold? Does he just wear a coat to fit in? There's no way to ask, and it doesn't matter. I need to stop being so curious.

A light snowfall has started. The grounds are dusted white and the sky is a dark gray. It's a dreary day for the start of a dreary trip, but I try not to think

about it too much when I open the carriage door for Lord Makai to enter. His carriage is much more elegant than the one I took. It's black as night with seams of gold within the wheels and the carriage itself. The curtains are dark and windows squeaky clean. There's no scratch or blemish, although after the trip that will probably change and it'll be fixed or replaced immediately.

Just as I'm about to close the door to join the driver, Lord Makai peers out and asks, "What are you doing?"

"Shutting the door."

"Why?"

"So we may leave."

"Get in," Lord Makai orders. When I open my mouth to question him his eyes flash a fearsome red.

Ok, I'm not complaining about sitting in a warm carriage rather than up front, I'm just curious as to why I'm allowed! The butler never sits with the noble, but Lord Makai has ordered it. So I kick the snow off on the step up and slip inside, shutting the door behind me while sitting across from Lord Makai.

It's nerve wracking. The carriage is big enough for probably six people but we're both fairly tall so our legs nearly brush. I try to angle mine away. The idea of being so close makes me nervous. My stomach is twisting into a knot.

"Thank you, Lord Makai, for allowing me to ride in the carriage," I say, although by now I should know better.

"Speak again and you will sit outside."

See? Rude.

Lord Makai holds out his hand. "Briefcase."

I quickly pass it over. He digs into it, reading over papers and setting them aside, but then things take a turn for the worse when he hands me a handful of letters and says, "Search through these. Any from the Baylor or Esour family that doesn't have to do with my business, set aside as trash."

Then he's back to work, completely unaware that I can only perform half of his request. Baylor is a word I recognize, I have seen it everywhere. Certain words are ok, such as "bakery" or "vegetables." Anything I saw in the market everyday as a child and learned from picking it up, but Esour? I don't know that word nor can I use context clues. I can't read any of these.

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Lord Makai growls.

I bite my lip. If he finds out, will I be fired? Maybe he'll just turn the carriage around. We aren't at the train station yet. It'd be easy to turn back, although he would have to take Higra.

I bow my head in embarrassment and mumble, "I'm sorry, I—I can't read, Your Grace."

"What?"

"I'm very sorry."

"Is that not something you should have informed Higra of?" Lord Makai sighs and, honestly, I prefer that over a growl.

"I didn't think I would be needed to read, Your Grace. I'm terribly sorry."

The papers are snatched from my hand causing me to flinch. I wait with eyes shut for a scolding, maybe even pain, but it never comes. When my eyes open, all I find is Lord Makai continuing to work with the papers set aside, although he is certainly not happy. His brow is furrowed.

"Surely there is a worker that may teach you. When we return, request assistance," Lord Makai orders. "Next time I won't be so lenient. Is that understood?"

"Absolutely, My Lord, but—"

"What?"

"That implies that you've already accepted me as your second choice butler."

And there's the whack to the back of the head I was waiting for, but you know what? It was worth it.

✝✝✝

Hehehehehe the trip has begun! And with it, Wallie's secret has been revealed but Soran took it well! Do you think this is a good sign? What do you expect to happen on their trip? Are you surprised with Wallie's attitude towards Soran? Because he certainly doesn't seem nearly as fearful as others lol

If you didn't already see, BroKenDayz has done a voiceover of the first four episodes of What Makes a Monster! Please check out their video, give it a listen and let them know if you liked it :) They plan to do more with other stories so maybe even subscribe too if it seems like something you'd be interested in! I've left an external link ^^

✝Ten✝

I've never been on a train and my first experience is about to be much better than expected. Much like the carriage, I'm told to ride with Lord Makai in coach, which is beyond baffling to me. But when I take into consideration the gift of a dagger, I start to question the true reasoning behind the order.

So he's ok with threatening me but not ok with others doing so? That is beyond confusing, but I'm not complaining. I never thought the day would come when I'd want to be in a train compartment with a vampire. I also never thought I'd be near a vampire again or even be in a train, and such a nice one at that.

Opening the door, the compartment is incredibly spacious and luxurious, nothing a commoner could ever dream of. There are four arm chairs made of plush red velvet with small endstands between them embellished with gold trims and gems that I question if they are authentic or not. On the shelves above are tightly shut cabinets with fine wine and snacks seen through the glass exterior. There are pillows and blankets stuffed beneath the chairs and golden railings above our heads for support. The privacy blinds for both the door and window are a soft gold and there's even a small table by the window to eat a meal on.

I almost don't want to sit, fearful I will stain the room with commoner cooties.

"Close the blinds," Lord Makai orders.

I am too late though. Upon turning, there are two passengers walking by; a husband and wife. When the woman sees Lord Makai she gasps in horror, raising her gloved hand to her trembling lips. She looks as if she's seen a demon; to her, Lord Makai might as well be. The husband scowls and tightens his hold around her trembling shoulders, pushing the both of them out of sight with a few quick strides.

I make a mental note to close the blinds, always, from now on.

After I take a seat by the door, Lord Makai raises a brow and asks, "Have you ever ridden a train before?"

I'm surprised by the question but still answer, "No, Your Grace."

"Take the window seat then, unless you're scared I'll bite?"

My jaw drops. Did he just...joke with me?

It's done before it even started, though. Lord Makai turns away without acknowledging that, yes, that was totally a joke. I'm so baffled that it takes me a few moments to finally sit across from him. His arm is perched on the edge of the windowsill, eyes fixated on the platform beside us. People are too busy scurrying about to take notice of the vampire quietly sitting behind the glass.

We're both quiet, waiting patiently for boarding to finish. The engine roars to life and the occasional passenger outside the door walks by. Then there's a knock; a man dressed in a blue uniform with gold buttons step into our compartment. With a bow, he says, "The train will be leaving the station shortly, Your Grace. Isabe should be reached by nightfall. The bar is open. It is located one car back."

Lord Makai nods and the man leaves, closing the door behind him. Then, like he said, minutes later the train lurches forward. I clutch the arms of the chair at the sudden movement that nearly throws me out of my seat. Once again, Lord Makai smirks at my near mishap but says nothing.

The wheels slowly turn. We're moving slower than a carriage yet I'm still fascinated. My nose is pressed against the glass while the platform disappears followed by the outskirts of the cold city, then we're moving so fast that everything is a blur of buildings lessening and lessening into snow-covered forests. By then, the glass is fogged by my breath and I wipe it away with the back of my arm, refusing to turn away.

The horn blares. I jolt at the sound, swinging my head from side to side like I expect to see it. There's the soft click of the wheels turning beneath us. The train itself feels like it's humming beneath my feet, a living being moving and breathing. Suddenly, I'm thrilled to have accompanied Lord Makai. To him, a train ride is simple. To me, it's a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Who knows how long I would have sat here watching the winter scenery if not for Lord Makai's briefcase hitting my leg. I sat it beside the chair earlier and it fell over, reminding me why I'm here. I sit up quickly, looking to Lord Makai with wide eyes. Luckily, he's not paying attention to me. He's watching the scenery like I was.

"Would you like a drink, Your Grace?" I ask, happy that he didn't call me out for basically forgetting about him for a few minutes. "There is some wine here I see, but if it's not to your liking, I could head to the bar for you."

"Look at you, taking the initiative. I'd say I'm impressed, but if the briefcase hadn't hit you I doubt you'd have remembered."

Shit. So he did notice.

Lord Makai gestures to the cupboard beside me, requesting the wine within. I'm quick to retrieve it and pour him a glass. It's a deep red, one that reminds me of blood, oddly enough. How fitting.

And so begins our silent ride. Lord Makai actually finishes the entire bottle of wine but doesn't look the least bit affected. His cheeks aren't flushed nor are his actions changed so once again I'm curious if food or drink does anything for him. Is it the taste, or another attempt to seem human?

A few hours into our silent but certainly not unpleasant ride, a meal is brought to us.The server sets them before us, as equally confused about the two plates as I am. The server backs away with a bow and only leaves once Lord Makai excuses them. For a moment I think that he got himself two meals so I sit back and look out the window. The meal is steak, steaming hot and smells absolutely delicious, with a baked potato, and green beans.

"Eat," Lord Makai orders, cutting carefully into his steak.

"It's for me?"

"I am baffled by how stupid the majority of your questions are."

I purse my lips. Ok, I'm getting free and probably amazingly delicious food so I can take that. Before I eat though, I pour Lord Makai another glass of wine like the somewhat decent butler that I am. He says nothing, of course.

When I take the first bite of my meal, I think I've died and gone to heaven. It truly is delicious, but eating with Lord Makai makes me nervous. Higra taught me to eat "properly," so she must have known we'd be sharing a meal at some point. But my hands are shaking and I keep scraping my fork or clinking it against the plate.

Lord Makai continuously glares.

"Did Higra not teach you any table manners?" He asks.

"She did. I—well, to be honest, I'm nervous."

He snorts. The darkness of his eyes state he's displeased, but the conversation ends there.

We eat in silence, save for my few mishaps, but I think I'm doing ok. I haven't been thrown out of the compartment so I guess I've got a few good points, at least enough not to be ridiculed or lectured. When we're finished with our meal, I head to the bar to inform the servers and they return to retrieve the dirty dishes.

The good food accompanied by the soft movement of the train is tiring. I'm not sure when it happens, but at some point I fall into a dreamless sleep.

✝✝✝

So Wallie is having his first train ride, yay lol And aw, they're having dinner together! How...sweet? Let's keep our fingers crossed our boy survives the trip xD

✝Eleven✝

When I wake, I find Lord Makai has fallen asleep as well. It's hours later. The sun is low and casting a warm light into the carriage. Lord Makai rests with his legs outstretched, arms crossed and head leaning against the glass, rocking from side to side with the movement of the train. Like this, he seems so exceedingly normal, save the being filthy rich part. But just as a man, resting on a train.

He isn't bursting into flames because of the sun. He doesn't attack any human he comes across to drain their blood. All the tales from books or rumors are so disproportionate to the real thing that isn't nearly as bad as others make him out to be. Rude, annoying, a typical noble, yes, Lord Makai is all that.

But a monster? I'd argue against that.

I'm not sure if he needs it, but I reach for a blanket and drape it carefully over his form. He stirs in his sleep, nothing more, then I watch the occasional farm or town pass by.

The scenery is breathtaking. Snow has covered the grounds and the train kicks it up from the tracks into puffs of smoke that dance with the wind. The sun peeks through the clouds, causing the snow to sparkle like stars. Winter was always tough at the farm; having to make sure we last through winter was what pushed us through the rough warm months. But now I can sit back and enjoy the cool air and breathtaking snowfall. Feels like I'm seeing it for the first time.

When the sun is about to set, there are lights on the horizon. The train is turning and slowing. We must be nearly there. There's obviously a town bustling with life. Great tracks of smoke escape into the sky. Snowflakes continue to rain down. There are ice crystals hanging from trees and frost on the edge of the glass. The train is fairly warm but I find myself shivering then looking to Lord Makai.

I'll wait to wake him. That was the plan at least; moments later something odd occurs.

I'm watching the snow fall when a low groan fills the room. Looking to Lord Makai, I find his brows furrowed and body tense. His head presses roughly against the glass, there's an expression of discomfort on his face. Then the compartment darkens, like a sudden shadow has consumed it. Lord Makai is breathing heavy. Everything starts to rattle. His wine glass nearly falls off the end stand before I catch it. What's in the cabinets shake and Lord Makai's fangs enlarge, pushing past his lips. Voices are heard, other passengers gasping and asking what's going on.

Whatever is happening is affecting them too? I don't know what it is, but Lord Makai is likely causing it so I call out to him, "Your Grace!"

No answer. Something starts to crack. It's the window, cracking around Lord Makai's figure, stretching out like a spider web. My eyes widen and I swiftly move over to wake him, pressing my hand to his shoulder, "Your Gra—"

I can't breathe.

Lord Makai's hand is wrapped tightly around my neck in an instant, squeezing so painfully that my eyes water. His eyes are searing red, so bright that they could rival the stars in the sky. But his face is twisted into that of anger, fangs bared to resemble a cornered animal ready to attack.

I grip his wrist and smack his arm without thought. I just want him to let go. I can't breathe. It hurts. The room is growing blurry. There's no thoughts, only actions, keep hitting and kicking my legs to get away.

Then the air returns in a giant gasp when Lord Makai releases, staring wide-eyed as I cough violently on the floor. His eyes fade while he sits frozen in place.

My neck hurts so bad that I know it'll be bruised. My lungs ache and burn. I gasp and cough and choke on the air that I can't seem to get enough of. The shadows fade. The rattling has stopped and the train horn blares, signaling

we've made it to Isabe. But I'm uncertain if I can stand. My legs are shaking uncontrollably, as if they still believe I'm being attacked.

There's a knock at the door but Lord Makai is quick to hiss before they enter, "Leave us."

"Apologies, Your Grace, but a strange occurrence frightened a few passengers and we've been told to check in. Is everything alright?"

"Fine. Just go."

The stranger leaves. Lord Makai's not facing me, instead staring out the window at Isabe coming fully into view. The train is moving so slowly now that the townhouses and train station are visible. Nothing like the ones of Vashna but quite alive and vibrant for the mining town.

Neither of us say a word when I crawl back into my seat, sitting quietly while holding my throbbing neck. I keep my gaze fixated on the floor then Lord Makai's shoes when I notice that he seems to be anxious. Normally he's so still, but now he can't seem to get comfortable, moving and changing his position.

I'm sure he didn't mean to harm me, it's why he released so quickly. But whatever nightmare he was having invoked such a reaction? I can't imagine what it was about, and I doubt he wishes to speak of it.

"Do you need—" My voice cracks. It's hoarse and my throat is dry, but all we have left to drink is wine. I dare not touch it. It's for Lord Makai.

"Don't speak," Lord Makai says. "And get yourself a drink."

"But the wi—"

"Did I stutter?"

Wow, even when he's in the wrong he's a jerk.

Nodding, I do as I'm told and pour myself a glass. It helps to an extent. Water would be much better, but it helps enough for my throat to at least

calm down. I'm not sure if speaking will be an option over the next few hours, but at least it doesn't feel like my neck is on fire.

The train is at a full stop now. The station is relatively quiet. Most have already left or are on their last stop. Passengers quietly and tiredly head for the exits with their belongings, disappearing among the frosted windows and light winter snow. Passengers walk by our compartment, chatting and laughing or yawning and expressing their exhaustion until, finally, Lord Makai speaks to me.

"Don't do that again," he says.

"Huh?"

"If I act strangely, don't do that again."

He stands without further explanation and refuses to give one throughout the time it takes to get to our hotel. In fact, the moment we get to the hotel I'm ordered to stay in my quarters, which are located in the basement. Lord Makai's room is on the second floor, so I'm told.

"How—" My voice cracks causing the receptionist to smile sweetly.

Lord Makai is already on his way upstairs when she says, "There's warm beverages in the kitchen. I'll happily have someone bring some to you."

I nod in appreciation. "Yes, p-please but—" I rub my neck. "If His Grace needs me—"

"There's a bell connected to his room that will notify you should he be in need of your assistance."

That's great. I don't want to be continuously running up and down the steps to check. But honestly, once I'm in my room I feel rather uncomfortable. Not because the room is bad, it's fairly standard for servants quarters. My luggage is here, placed at the end of the bed. There's a small desk with a chair, a bed, an end stand and a wardrobe. The mattress is rather firm and the sheets are old, but it's warm and that's the most I care about.

Sure enough, there's a bell resting just above the bed. Should Lord Makai ring it, I'll know immediately. Only he never does, even when I'm starting to think he'll want a snack. There's no indication that he's even thought of calling me.

Is it because of what happened earlier? Wow, could he actually feel that bad about it? I'm honestly shocked, and curious.

What could have bothered him so much to react so violently? I've had my fair share of nightmares, but not once have I awakened in such a manner. There have been times with tears and gasps of horror, but Lord Makai was on a whole other level, an unbridled rage that one could feel in the very air, and I can't fathom what it could bring such a reaction about.

I tell myself not to concern myself with it. I'll never find out anyways. He didn't tell earlier, he won't speak of it later either. Instead, I get comfortable in bed, somehow still tired even after the nap I had on the train earlier. It's a lot easier to fall asleep here than I expected.

✝✝✝

Hmm, what could Soran have dreamt about to make him react that way? And is he possibly leaving Wallie be now because of what happened?

So people were pretty even, but ultimately two updates with shorter chapters won. As long as no one is hating the shorter chapters then I'll stick with this schedule. I also think it's helping a bit with bringing in new readers. It seems to be getting more traction since I'm updating twice a week. Obviously some chapters will be longer than others and if I remain ahead on patreon I'll try to post longer chapters sometimes.

But also remember that this is on patreon and the chapters aren't broken up so if you want early updates then that's something to consider.
https://www.patreon.com/Twoony

✝Twelve✝

Lord Makai is his usual cranky self come morning. I can't believe I kind of missed it.

In the morning, Lord Makai runs over our plans for the day, making sure to glare at me the whole time too since, apparently, I would have been given a sheet or asked to write this information down to keep track. Since I can't do that, Lord Makai tells me, but I will not disappoint.

After breakfast, we ready ourselves for the first meeting of the day. Snow continues to fall outside so I must hold the umbrella for Lord Makai. My coat, however, is not spared from the snowfall. My back is covered almost instantly.

The town is bustling with life, horses trotting through wide streets pulling their carriages that dig into the dirt. Once white snow turns a murky brown from the mud while the shops sitting side by side are filled with warm light and their signs dusted white. Civilians are rushing about in their heavy coats, arms crossed or hands and faces hidden by layers upon layers of clothes. There's similarity between Isabe and Vashna, the chatter and slight laughter in the air, but Isabe feels friendlier. They're the everyday folk that moved to a booming town for jobs to support their families and it seems to be working. Business really is booming based on the foot traffic that Lord Makai and I see while riding in the carriage to the Makai Mining Co. building in town square next to city hall.

I'm still repeating the schedule in my head, muttering it once or twice then catching Lord Makai raising a brow. Ah, I must be getting too loud, so I repeat the day in my head until I'm certain I won't forget it.

There's the meeting with the heads of Makai Mining Co., one of which has been running the main hub for twelve years named Jeffro. We will have lunch with them afterwards in a restaurant nearby with a name I could never dream to pronounce. Afterwards we will return to tour the facility, which

was recently expanded so there are many new workers. Today and tomorrow will consist of Lord Makai observing how the operations are run. He said he'd go over the rest with me later. For now, this is simple enough not to forget.

It's not surprising that Makai Mining Co. is arguably the nicest building in town. A dark brick building painted black, four stories high and as big as a factory with sparkling glass windows and trims within of emerald and silver. There are double doors at the entrance, heavy and wide with arched silver handle bars and within is even nicer. The floors are made of marble with a great chandelier overhead, although they're slightly overshadowed by the chaos within.

At the front is a receptionist desk, but behind her are glass windows that reveal a long room filled with desks and workers that are running about with their hands full. Makai Mining Co. must be the headquarters for all the mines owned by Lord Makai in the kingdom with how busy they are, which isn't surprising. Isabe is a huge mine that has yet to be depleted and, from rumors within the estate, that won't change anytime soon.

"Your Grace!" Calls the receptionist in her purple and black pinup suit. She bows swiftly. "What an honor it is to see you. Please, follow me to the meeting room. Everyone has already arrived and are eagerly awaiting your presence."

Even I want to roll my eyes at her sweet tone, but Lord Makai says nothing; only rolls his coat off his shoulders to hand to me. We follow after the receptionist that takes us to the elevator, another contraption I've never been on. The inside is small with more silver bars that we can see through in order to admire the levels. The woman pulls a silver lever that clicks before we're pulled up.

I accidentally grip the back of Lord Makai's arm.

"Wallace," he hisses.

I let go immediately. "My apologies, Your Grace."

When the doors open, we're lead out only for Lord Makai to stop just short of double doors with a silver plaque overhead.

"Wait here," Lord Makai orders. "You will be called if needed."

Then he walks through the double doors. I catch a glimpse of a long wooden table with a multitude of men and women in fine suits, one of which must run this place in particular because he's at the head of the table. But all I catch of him is a huge nose and sparkling bald head, then I'm left to sit outside in a chair that the receptionist brings for me from another room. She leaves too, returning downstairs.

This is boring. I rather be at the estate, at least I have something to do to pass the time. While I understand not attending the meeting, they're likely discussing profits or trade secrets, following Lord Makai only to sit out here until he needs me is a pain. Yes, the extra pay for my services will be great this coming payday, but if I had a choice I'd say no.

"Everyone has been in an uproar all month, and for what? The attention of a no good vampire that they would rather not have attention from to begin with," a man says from somewhere nearby.

I search the hall but see no one.

"He pays all their salaries, of course they're in an uproar. There is nothing we can do about it either," a woman sighs. "King Baylor must do something about the freak. At this rate, he'll own everything in Aberia and there won't be a thing anyone can do to change it."

"Suppose the beast is here yet? Father said he'd be atte—"

The man stepping out of a room from down the hall stops mid sentence to stare wide-eyed at me. Behind him is a woman that looks somewhat similar to him. Siblings perhaps?

Both are rather tall with strawberry blonde hair, but the girl has soft green eyes while the boy has brown eyes. They're dressed beautifully, the woman in a gorgeous dress with ruffled ends and the man in a form fitted suit. They

have money, that's for sure, or based on what he was saying; their father had money, likely from the mines.

"Hello," the woman says with a kind smile although her eyes do not show the same sentiment. "Are you perhaps Lord Makai's personal butler?"

I stand and give a bow. "Yes, My Lady. My name is Wallace Jonessan, or just Wallie."

"Wallie." Her heels click when she comes towards me with the man right behind. "So he's here then, Lord Makai?"

I stand up fully and nod.

"Our father runs this place," the man says, gesturing between the two of them. "I am Artur Brabec and this is my sister, Lebina."

"It is a pleasure to meet you both."

"Lord Makai will be attending lunch afterwards with everyone, won't he?" Lebina asks sweetly.

"Yes, he will."

"How wonderful. We were hoping to greet him. After all, Artur is set to take over after father retires. It'd be a good idea to get to know His Grace now."

During a time like this, I wish I had some form of status so I could put them in their place. Belittling someone they don't even know behind their backs; shouldn't well educated children have better manners? Ridiculous.

Luckily, Artur and Lebina don't stay long. They bid me adieu, although judging by the conversation I'll see them again at lunch. I return to my seat, squirming a bit in place after time continues to pass.

I don't know how long I sit there before the doors open. I jump to my feet immediately and that damn natural reaction of mine kicks me in the butt because I smile the moment I see Lord Makai. Oddly enough, he doesn't glare, but he gives me this look that basically says, "stop it." I can't help it!

Smiling is my natural state, sorry not all of us have a naturally cranky demeanor!

"We are so pleased to have you join us for lunch today, Your Grace," Jeffro says. Now that he's out of the room I notice that he's rather short. He walks with a cane and a silly top hat to hide his bald head. "And when we return we have quite the tour planned for you—"

"I don't need a planned tour. I will go about my business alone," Lord Makai interrupts causing Jeffro to go a little red in the face.

"Ah, but surely you will want a guide."

"No."

It's amazing how Lord Makai can end a conversation. I need to take some pointers.

This time I don't get to sit in the carriage on the way to lunch since some members of the committee join Lord Makai. I have to sit up front with the driver and shiver uncontrollably until we reach the restaurant that, luckily, isn't too far.

However, when we get to the restaurant, Lord Makai doesn't follow everyone in. He lingers outside with me for a moment and says, "Take the carriage back to the office."

"Huh?"

"Take a look around. Just observe."

"Why me?"

"Do you think anyone can focus, or will act normally with me there?"

I bite my lip. He asked that so nonchalantly, like it doesn't bother him to think about how the whole office probably feels like a frozen wasteland simply by the idea of Lord Makai visiting. Once again, it's an unsettling thought.

"Return in—" Lord Makai checks his pocket watch. "Forty minutes. Wait inside after." Then hands that pocket watch to me.

"I-I can't take this. It p-probably costs more than my life!"

"I'm sure it does. Now go. Forty minutes starts now."

"W-Wait! What am I looking for?" I ask, but he doesn't respond, slipping inside without another word.

This son of a bitch. One second I feel bad for him and the next I wanna slap him over the back of the head. Whatever, he didn't tell me what exactly to look for so if I screw this up, it's his fault.

The driver takes me back to the office where the receptionist greets me. I inform her that I've been asked to look around. She offers her assistance but I declined since I took the hint that he wants me to go alone. Again, not sure what I'm looking for as I meander about this overly large facility, but I try to keep my eyes peeled for something suspicious or maybe not healthy for the workplace.

I'm on the verge of giving up when thirty minutes pass and I know I must leave soon to meet the forty minute deadline, but something peculiar catches my eye. I'm on the fourth floor, passing by an office when I happen to hear a frantic ripping sound. The door is slightly ajar, enough for me to see a woman inside, shredding paper with her hands. Angling myself to the right, I also take note of a man in a red suit watching and whispering orders. Then she stands and follows him through a door in the office. I take a chance by sneaking into the room, listening softly to their whispers in the conjoined room.

"Is that all of it?" The man asks.

"Yes, Sir."

"You claimed that last time yet I found a whole stack of agreements here. If the beast discovers even one percentage of his profits being sold off, we'll be killed on the spot."

So this is what Lord Makai wanted me to find out? Suppose it's easier for me, the butler that people aren't paying much attention to, to discover any foolery compared to Lord Makai, who frightens simply by the mention of his name. I don't stay longer to hear more, that's enough to tell Lord Makai, plus at this rate I'll be late. Hopefully it's forgiven considering I found out something.

✝✝✝

I'm updating early since I'm going to my mom's. I don't know if I'll be back tomorrow or Sunday so rather get this out now. Uh oh spaghetti o's, though! Someone has been caught =O Man, Wallie is good at sneaking out the tea, isn't him? He listened in on two not so good conversations xD Do you think Soran's trip has more to do with what Wallie over heard? What will Soran do to those that were caught, if anything?

Reminder, you can read ahead on my patreon. This is half of Ch. 7 on patreon, which is already up to Ch. 15 :)
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✝Thirteen✝

Upon returning to the restaurant, I wait near the entrance. At least it's warm in here, even if I stand the entire time with a few other servants. However, the wait isn't all that pleasant and it takes all my willpower not to glare or say something about the obvious kissing up everyone is doing.

Lord Makai sits elegantly at the table, lips set into a thin line. His eyes are dark and devoid of interest or emotion for that matter. Yet all those around him are grinning and speaking animatedly, as if he's a close friend. Lebina and Artur are no different, although based on what I heard earlier they clearly don't like Lord Makai. No one does. The whole restaurant has this tense, cold sensation that is seen through the constant glares, rushed footsteps, or stiff customers.

The lords and ladies stand, all bowing graciously to His Grace when lunch is over. Once again, I sit in the front of the carriage on the return, but once we arrive Jeffro attempts to give us guides again.

"Your Grace, please allow my children, Artur and Lebina, to escort you through the facility. Artur is next in line for this position and Lebina has grown up here nearly her whole life," Jeffro says proudly, gesturing to his children that bow in acknowledgement.

Lord Makai cocks a brow then says, "The person next in line for your position is one most suitable for it."

Oh, I wanna laugh so bad. Hold it in. Hold it in, Wallie!

"Return to your duties. My butler and I will tour the facility. Should we be in need of assistance, I will let you know." Lord Makai ends the conversation with that, walking away unaware (but probably suspecting) of the fuming glares from Jeffro and his kids.

"Your pocketwatch, Your Grace," I say once we're walking through the quiet halls. I hand over the device that was safely stashed away in my

pocket.

"Did you see anything?" Lord Makai asks quietly.

"Yes, well, heard to be more specific. On the fourth floor, office three, there was a woman shredding papers and a man ordering her to do so. He mentioned getting rid of the agreements and something about you being angry if you discovered your profits being sold off."

"Is that so?" He hums. I suspected he'd be angry, but there's almost a smile in his eyes.

Lord Makai stops outside a door leading to the large office we could see through the glass at the entrance. Before I open the door though, I ask, "You don't seem surprised by the news, Your Grace. Is that what this visit is truly about? Were you already aware that someone was stealing from you?"

"Congratulations, Wallace, you're not a total loss."

I'd get angry about that but I'm already a bit too angry about something else. Maybe that's obvious because Lord Makai tilts his head to the side.

"Does this happen often?" I ask, not even considering if I'm crossing a line by doing so until after I've already asked. Too late now though, might as well enjoy the view in hell if I've already sent myself to it.

"Do your workers often steal from you? There was one on the estate before too," I say more to myself than him.

"You really do ask a lot of questions, Wallace, most of which have an obvious answer."

That's the only response I get because Lord Makai opens the door himself and steps in, leaving me behind with a scowl. I suppose big corporations often have someone inside taking money, but deep down I know it has more to do with who, or rather what, Lord Makai is rather than the corporation itself.

"Wallace!"

I jump at the sharp call of my name, quickly rushing after His Grace.

Sure enough, Lord Makai really must have known about the thieves because he beelines his way to certain offices or people that practically piss themselves when he calls for them. A terrified silence befalls the once chaotic workspace. All are waiting on the edge of a knife, wondering who will be next.

Twelve in total, including the two I spoke of, are sent to a room on the first floor to wait for whatever punishment they will receive. The office is simple, a meeting room with a table and chairs that are now filled. Lord Makai sits at the front. Few windows line the hall, allowing those that pass to see within, but none dare look. They practically run by in terror.

Now that all are caught, I stand awkwardly in the corner. A briefcase sits before Lord Makai. He's pulling out papers slowly. Each one makes someone's eyes widen in the room. Jeffro is with us, sweating profusely and wiping his face with a cloth.

The longer Lord Makai is silent, the worse it gets.

His eyes glow a bright red as an ominous aura pulsates around his suddenly rigid form. Magic seeps from his very pores like an invisible mist over the whole room. Like the train; the room darkens and glass cracks, there's a feeling of sorrow and frustration in the air. I've been around magic before, but what Lord Makai possesses is dark magic that's been banned for centuries.

Vilis is what it's called; used by the God Tethros that brings death, chaos, and destruction. Those that practice it become twisted beasts known as Unborn, giving up their humanity in order to possess immeasurable strength. Lumen, gifted by Goddess Aena, is the opposite. Priests and Knights of Aena use lumen magic since it's meant to foster peace, love, and creation. They are two very different forms of magic with very different feelings. And Lord Makai, how he came about and the magic he possesses, is purely vilis. It even leaves a bad taste in the mouth, like smoke and ash.

"It appears I have been too lenient to have allowed so many to take for so long," Lord Makai speaks in a low whisper, hissed between his teeth. Although he sits at the table with his head perched in his hand like he's bored, his eyes are deadly. "Trying to hide the truth by tearing up a few papers? What an insult. Do you think me a fool?"

"O-Of course not, Y-Your Grace!" A man sputters then whimpers when Lord Makai's nose twists in disgust; his fangs press past his lips so that everyone in the room gives an audible gulp.

"I imagine your employer has promised to bale you out should you be discovered."

I peer about the room at the word "employer," finding a few stiffening and one of the women starts to cry hysterically.

"Bringing a lawsuit against all of you is the course of action to take, however, we all know how that will end. You will get a slap on the wrist and go home to bathe in the riches given to you by stealing from my loyal workers. That doesn't sound quite fair, does it?" That's a rhetorical question, but Lord Makai still waits for an answer that's never given.

"I don't much like being taken advantage of—" Lord Makai stands. Each step he takes around the table is louder than the last.

I'm pretty sure we've all stopped breathing, including me.

Lord Makai stands behind a row of workers. Only two turn to peer up at him. The others are shaking, fingers clenching helplessly into their pants.

"No one will be baling you out," Lord Makai speaks. "Since none will be alive to stand trial."

It's my first week all over again. One moment everyone is alive and the next four are dead; their now headless bodies slide to the floor. Lord Makai's sword is out, dripping red as the remaining eight scream in terror. The room erupts, bodies launching out of chairs, rushing for the door that won't budge.

I shut my eyes, flinching after every scream and thud of a body hitting the floor until one voice, the crying woman from earlier, carries over the rest.

"P-Please, s-spare me, please, Your Grace!" She pleads.

I'm expecting her to grow quiet, but she never does.

"I am aware your boss threatened your position should you not comply, because of that, your fate will not be the same," says Lord Makai. I think he has sheathed his sword. I don't know because I refuse to look. I'm sick simply thinking about it.

"However, find a new job in a month, otherwise I will return to take your head too, is that understood?"

The woman doesn't verbally respond. Her cries continue, mixed between gasps of breath and hiccups.

"And Jeffro," Lord Makai calls. "You're fired."

"W-What? But Your Grace, I-I wasn't involved!"

"You were too lazy to notice. I suppose your son really isn't next in line, seeing as he is fired too."

"Y-Your Grace, pleas—"

"Silence," Lord Makai hisses.

I've yet to open my eyes. However, I feel someone standing by me and that is proven correct when Lord Makai says, "Wallace."

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"Higra told you the rules, did she not?"

The rules are still fucked, but I slowly open my eyes. Thankfully, I am not assaulted by a room of corpses since Lord Makai is standing before me. However, he's covered in blood. Much like the first time I saw him, it's in

his hair, dripping from his mouth and staining his clothes, but he doesn't appear the least bit concerned. There's a distance, a cold stare and complete lack of empathy. I can't lie and say it isn't frightening.

"We're returning to the hotel," he says, finally stepping away so that I can now see the room. My stomach churns and I look away, refusing to acknowledge the corpses or the sound of my feet splashing in the blood on the floor. My shoes even squeak when I walk, telling me that I'm leaving a trail just like Lord Makai.

The ride back to the hotel is silent. My thoughts are anything but.

✝✝✝

Since I updated Friday instead of Saturday it felt like a really long wait so I updated today instead xD Next update will be on Saturday as usual. But, well, that was certainly unpleasant o.O Soran has a point though, seeing as nothing is ever done to those that cross him. However, how do you feel about what happened? Will this affect the relationship between Wallie and Soran?

✝Fourteen✝

"Ouch!" I hiss, ripping my hand away from the steaming kettle.

My fingers are red. One of the kitchen staff smiles apologetically, asking if I'm in need of assistance. I shake my head and finish up Lord Makai's tea.

When I look in the cup, all I see is red. Then I blink the sight away and shake my head. With a heavy sigh, I return to Lord Makai's room. He's sitting at the desk, rifling through more papers. Like this it seems like he just fired the workers instead of killed them in cold blood.

Maybe I sit the tray of tea down too hard. Some spills over the cup. Lord Makai raises his gaze to meet mine. Maybe I don't hide my glare this time either, which has him smirking. Not frowning or appearing upset. No, he's fucking smirking.

"Be careful, Wallace. Should you break anything, it will be taken out of your paycheck."

"I'm starting to wonder if I want that paycheck," I hiss even if in the back of my mind I'm berating myself for it.

Lord Makai snorts and takes the cup, sipping some tea before speaking over the rim, "Are you surprised by today's events? You have been working for me long enough to know what to expect, I'm sure."

"Rumors and gossip should be taken with a bag of salt."

"The saying is grain."

"Yours are extreme so it's a bag."

Lord Makai snorts.

"But now I'm thinking the rumors aren't extreme at all. Did you have to kill them?" I ask.

"I didn't. Jeffro and the woman lived."

This bastard.

"Did they have to steal?" Lord Makai inquires with a roll of his eyes. "Can you take a guess how much money they took?"

"You don't even need it."

"Oh, I don't?" Lord Makai leans back. It's frightening how composed he is. "So the money for my company isn't needed, interesting. Would you like to tell the workers that? Perhaps we should head to their homes now and tell their families how they were fired because the company didn't need the money and therefore could not pay their workers."

Lord Makai stands. Like earlier, each step is heavy until he's looming over me but I don't back down even when he leans in close so that every word is breathed softly against my cheeks. This close, I notice how pale his skin is, how red his eyes are, how there isn't a single blemish or scar, skin as clear as porcelain. Such an appearance many others wish to achieve yet I find it almost terrifying. He really is nothing like us.

"What do you think would have happened had I spared them?" He asks in a whisper but his tone is sharp.

"You would have taken them to court," I answer, but that doesn't seem to be enough. Lord Makai waits for me to continue. I'm reminded of what Layne said months ago, and what Lord Makai said only hours ago.

I sigh and mumble, "And someone with power would have made sure nothing bad happened to them."

"You remember well."

The one compliment I get and it pisses me off.

"Something wrong? Angry that I didn't turn out to be the great hero you thought I was?" Lord Makai asks. He's still leaning over me so I take a step back, but he reaches out. When his hand wraps around my wrist, his skin is ice cold, so much so that I wonder if even a vampire should feel as such.

"Not angry," I answer. "Just disappointed."

Lord Makai, for the briefest of moments, looks taken aback, or maybe I'm seeing things. The expression is gone in a second.

"I idolized you as a kid. When I came to the estate, I thought the rumors were ridiculous and even after months of working there, I couldn't find a reason as to why everyone hated you so much other than being different, but now I think I get it." I meet Lord Makai's gaze when I rip my hand away. "You're a stubborn, cold, and twisted man. You're bitter and pessimistic. You're moody and unforgiving, and I pity you."

Lord Makai isn't responding. Maybe this is my death sentence. Now I've gone and done it, said too much and spoke with disrespect. Any aristocrat would have me hanged for this, but there is no sudden anger, no slap or kick or unsheathing of a blade. Instead, Lord Makai smirks once more, only this time his eyes are completely dead.

"You learn well, too, Wallace," he says, pressing two fingers beneath my chin. "Remember this feeling to save yourself the trouble of such ridiculous idolization in the future."

Before I can respond, I'm put in a familiar situation. The door opens and I groan seconds before Lord Makai snaps his fingers and I'm thrown out. The door slams shut behind me just as I hit the ground, hissing at my throbbing back.

"Asshole," I growl, sitting up to glare at the door, but that glare diminishes in a second. For some reason, I feel like the bad guy. I'm too nice for my own good.

That's the last I see of Lord Makai that evening, at least in person. My dreams, however, decide to remind me why I idolized him in the first place.

✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝

There was a constant stench of smoke, blood, and steel. The sky was dark even when the sun was out. Firepits were scattered throughout our once beautiful village. Farmhouses turned into barracks and barns were littered with soldiers and their belongings; screams echoed over the fields even when there were no battles. There was drunken laughter and the grass had long since been dead, turned to mud that sloshed under every step. Tents were set up for soldiers, horses were tethered to makeshift holds and a great wooden wall had been built around the town of Chandri.

My hometown, taken by King Treddin and his army to be used as their station after breaking through the frontlines. For three long months I was there, cleaning soldiers dirty rags, cooking meals or being chased like a wild animal for amusement. Sometimes they'd hit just because they could, other times I was a dummy, carrying a target that they'd purposely attempt to miss with their arrows. My arms and legs were scared so I could never forget.

I cried for a while. Then I realized crying didn't do anything. So I stopped crying and stopped screaming and stopped begging. I survived. I did as I was told and hoped beyond hope to see my mother again. When we were separated during the ambush, I didn't know what to do. I still didn't know what to do, sitting in a cold tent with rags that barely clung to my form. Sometimes I didn't recognize myself. If I looked into our bucket of water or fetched some from the creek, all I saw was a skeleton staring back at me, the skin stretched and dirtied.

My stomach always ached with a hunger that nearly drove me mad. My body was always sore. I was tired and cold and scared everyday. So were the others, some so scared they rather not risk another day. It wasn't odd to wake up to a cold corpse by my side or hear the slight creaking of a tree branch from the sudden weight tied to it outside.

I couldn't even wish to go home because my home was being used by the very beasts harming me in the first place. Monsters that smelled of alcohol and blood, who beat and laughed and hurt because they were angry themselves, because we were at war. Although at that age I didn't even

understand what war meant, so when they looked at me with such hatred I wondered if it was me.

Had I done something wrong? Did Goddess Aena forsake me for not listening to Mommy and brushing my teeth every night before bed or lying about not wetting the bed once or twice? Was I bad and this was my punishment?

I thought that for a long time, for the three months while kept there, until one afternoon something changed.

My ankle hurt. The chain that locked me in place rattled with every little movement. I hated the sound so much that I pressed my hands to my ears. Others were sleeping, Raysha gave me a kind smile. She worked as a baker in town, once a ball of sunshine but her smiles were lackluster those days, although everyone gave her credit for trying.

Then, there was a commotion outside. The cry of a horn carried over the fields. Shadows of rushing soldiers passed outside followed by the clanking of armor and swords. Then voices were ringing over the air, "One of Baylor's battalions approaches! To your stations men!"

"They are but local soldiers, nothing trained as a knight. We can handle them easy," another spoke with twisted amusement.

"Sent to die, what a tragedy." Laughter followed.

The tent was ripped open. Two soldiers stepped in shouting orders. Those with strength left were whisked away first, told to help the soldiers at their stations, sharpen swords and the likes, but when they came to me there was a sudden explosion. The soldier and I both jumped, but he left without a word, leaving me alone in the tent, still chained to a post.

That was when the screaming started and the fires and the smell. I couldn't stand it. I shut my eyes and covered my ears, curled up in the dirt to flinch after every sound and scream. But there was only a sheet separating me from the war outside. Arrows pierced the tent. I screamed in terror.

Moments later, a sword ripped through just as a body dropped in, his dead eyes staring at me and mouth agape.

I threw my hands over my mouth to silence the scream, but the view before me would have silenced it anyways. The tent was torn and the destruction outside no longer hidden.

Chandri was ablaze as the sun set, the horizon as red as the blood on the ground. But there was a mass of twisted black and red in the sky, shaking like a mirage. It dropped to the ground and an explosion followed, flames burst forth then it whistled through the sky when a golden light chased it. Knights shots arrows and spells at the dark figure now in the shape of a bird as big as horse flying overhead.

I watched for a long time, curled up in the remains of the tent with a corpse. The sky grew dark. Soldiers ran past outside. Screams and explosions and the smell of smoke carried over the fields while King Treddin and his knights fought the strange apparition. The knights continued to drop one after the other, the life leaving their eyes until only King Treddin remained, but he, too, fell to darkness that took the shape of a man. The stranger's sword pierced King Treddin's back and his body crumbled.

The battle was over, but I was too scared to move. I don't know how long I sat there shivering and alone. The moon was high, and although there were people rushing by outside, I was too scared to make a sound. That was until someone leaned in, peering at me through the night. He was covered in blood with unusual red eyes, but I wasn't scared. Not even when he kneeled beside me, lips pulled back into a warm smile, as warm as the sun after a cold winter's night.

"Everything is ok. You're safe now," he said, holding out his hand, waiting patiently with kind eyes that somehow made me feel safe enough to cry. He frowned when the tears began until I crawled into his open arms that enveloped me in a tight hug.

"You must be cold and hungry," he spoke gently. I buried my face in his jacket. It smelled of sweat and smoke, but it was far more comforting than I could imagine.

"What's your name, little one?"

"W-Wallie."

"Wallie," he spoke my name so softly it tickled my ears. "My name is Soran."

"That's a funny name."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Soran chuckled. "What do you say we get you some new clothes and something warm to eat, hmm? Would you like that?"

"P-Please."

The chain was off, and Soran took me away from that awful place while combing his cold fingers through my hair. There was talk among the soldiers of Soran, of the supposed monster. After what I went through and what I saw, when I looked at Soran all I saw was my savior; a brave man that came to battle and held my hand when I ate and waited with me until my mother arrived.

It was three days later. She and many others were finally escorted to the village upon hearing the news. Soran carried me to the villagers pouring in hoping to find their lost families. I spotted my mother in the crowd, gasping and pointing animatedly.

"There, it's her, that's my mommy!" I said, smiling to Soran who smiled right back.

Soran sat me down and patted my head. "Go to her then."

"Aren't you coming?"

"Make sure to show her a big smile, Wallie. She must have missed you terribly."

I didn't think anything of it, assuming that when I turned away Soran would still be there. I ran to my mother, crying hysterically alongside her when she wrapped her arms around me. I did as Soran told me to, and smiled so big it

hurt, but I would have done that anyway. Seeing Mom smile back and hold me so tight made me forget all the bad, even if only for a moment.

But when I went to tell her about Soran, he was already gone. That was the last I ever saw of him.

✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝✝

My throat is bone dry and I'm hanging halfway off the bed when I wake. My body is sore from the weird angle. I sit up with a tired groan.

Why'd I have to go and dream of the past? Is my conscious trying to make me feel bad for being mean to Soran—

I snort.

Right, *Lord Makai*.

Feels weird to recall hearing his name or being allowed to say it. Those three days with him I think I said Soran so much that he probably grew tired of his own name. But he certainly didn't act like he does now. He was always giving me a soft smile. He should smile more often, it's oddly fitting, not that I'd tell him that.

I swing my legs off the bed. My head hurts, so does my heart. I'm thinking of Mom all of a sudden, and how the joy of being returned to her was so short lived because not even a day later we learned that Dad had been a part of the battle.

He didn't make it.

My throat tightens when tears come to my eyes. I don't get any more sleep that night. Memories of my parents and home consume me.

✝✝✝

So, we got the specifics of how Wallie and Soran met. Do you understand why Wallie holds some respect towards him then? Why did Soran treat him so differently as a child, was it simply because he was a

kid? Also, Soran being good with kids made me smile and now I'm just like alkdsjflskdfj cute <3

✝Fifteen✝

Day two of the trip shouldn't be much different than the first, but considering what happened yesterday, it's no surprise that the company is dead silent when Lord Makai enters. Everyone keeps their head low and voice down. Some shiver in place, a few even cry and none dare to step in his path. We haven't talked either, other than a few orders given this morning. Although the thieves were already "taken care of" yesterday, Lord Makai continues his surveillance of the office while also stopping in to give his opinion on some new hires for the newly opened positions.

The atmosphere is tense and only tense, but I do my job as I am meant to. I don't ask questions and I sure as hell don't smile. Lord Makai makes no mention of yesterday so neither do I, although I continuously find myself watching him and remembering the kind smiles he gave me all those years ago. I haven't seen a similar one since. I'm starting to question if my memories are lying to me. They must be, or maybe I just really want them to be.

The second day goes by without a hitch. The third day, however, we're going to the actual mines. They're on the outskirts of town near the hills and deep within the earth. Some portions of the mine are stripped with levels upon levels reaching further down while others are but deep, dark tunnels into the hills. There are outhouses scattered about, offices and places for workers to rest. We're in one now but won't be staying.

"Are we really going inside?" I whisper when the head of the mines, Wyvin, leaves to retrieve a few workers and safety equipment.

"I am. You may stay here," Lord Makai replies.

"I don't think it's right for the butler to stay up here while the master does all the dirty work."

"So you're keen on being a good butler now?" He hums. "No more speaking out of place then? I'm certainly looking forward to that."

Without much thought, the words sort of just slip out of my mouth, "You're so fucking petty."

Lord Makai actually goes wide-eyed and it isn't until he clicks his tongue that I realize what I did.

"Did you just curse at me?" He asks.

I smile apologetically. "Accidentally."

"I can't imagine what hasn't accidentally slipped then."

"Can you blame me? I thought we were pretending the other day didn't happen."

"Oh no, I remember, but you would have probably forgotten until we returned and found your pay cut." Lord Makai smirks while I gape.

"You actually cut my pay?"

"My humblest of apologies, Wallace," he says so sarcastically that it actually pains me. "You see, I had some greedy workers steal from me, but I've decided to let them be. After all, I don't need the money. You understand, don't you?"

"Petty!"

"Now that certainly wasn't accidental."

I'm about to accidentally punch him when Wyvin returns with a few others and some gear that's meant for me. There's some overalls to help keep warm, a hat with a light on it and some gloves. I don't see how that is much protection when the threat is being buried alive, but ok. With a heavy sigh, I take the gear and put it on begrudgingly.

"Are you not wearing the safety gear, Your Grace?" I inquire when I see that Lord Makai has only thrown on one of the jackets rather than wearing his own.

"Why would I wear it?"

Oh, right, immortal. Suppose it doesn't matter if a rock smashes in his head. Actually, that may literally knock some sense into him. Still, I rather not see anymore blood while on this trip so if everyone could refrain from injuries, that would be great.

"Isn't it better to not have to put up with an injury though?" I hum, but his only response is walking out the door.

Now he's going to ignore me? Like I said, so fucking petty.

Off we go to the mines that are as dark and depressing as expected. Inside there are only tight spaces that smell of cold rain and dirt. There are tracks for coal carts and mighty wooden and steel beams supporting the mineshafts. The only light comes from those atop our hats. The rocky terrain is difficult to traverse. I'm stumbling over my own feet. On instinct I reach out, gripping the jacket of one in front of me. I'm immediately met with a pair of glowing red eyes in the dark. It's the elevator all over again.

"Wallace," Lord Makai hisses.

"Sorry, it's dark."

Before I let go though, he sighs and says, "I will allow it this once." Then he leans in so that the light cuts across his chiseled features, casting dark shadows but illuminating the sharpness of his face. "Keep up, and don't expect this to happen again."

"Implying you really do plan to bring me on another trip?"

"Are you aware how easy it is to get lost in the mines?"

I bite my lip.

"It'd be such a pity if you never made it out."

"I don't think you should threaten your workers," I whisper, smirking when Wyvin stops upon realizing we aren't following.

Lord Makai rolls his eyes. "Suppose I could fire you right here and now then I can threaten you freely."

"I don't think that's how it works."

"Let go. Now."

"I'm kidding. It's all jokes." I smile and, for some reason, that makes Lord Makai scowl. Then he turns swiftly and I guess the jacket holding is ok because he doesn't smack my hand away as we continue our walk. Maybe clinging to him makes me like a little kid, but it's unusually comforting.

Considering no one has died during this inspection yet, I'd say the mines are fine. We don't stay there too long, thankfully. Some more pleasantries are given between the workers and Lord Makai before we finally leave the mines, returning to the hotel where we both can clean ourselves off. Although I don't stay with His Grace very long. I retrieved his snacks and drinks, then head back to my room where thoughts of yesterday linger in the back of my mind.

There are times where I understand Lord Makai's position and times where I'm still not ok with his actions even if I understand. I wish I could talk more freely, even if my opinions likely mean very little to him. Then again, I can't begin to understand a life such as his. How old is he? At least 1,600 years, and being hated or condemned for that long must warp the mind. There's nothing I can do, not that I want to do anything...or have the right to.

Whatever, whatever, I'm not thinking about it anymore!

Rolling over, I attempt to get some sleep.

I don't know when I wake up, but I know why. There's a noise; the rattling of a doorknob, although for a moment it reminds me of chains. I stiffen in bed, pass the sound off as another going to their room until light from the hallway pours in. My back is facing the door. A shadow looms on the wall. The door shuts slowly.

I must be hallucinating, but I'm certain they came in. I don't know who it is or what they want, but the dagger Lord Makai gifted me is sitting on the bedside table behind me. Now I understand why some are said to put it under their pillows. Do I have time to turn and grab it? Is there someone even in my—

A floorboard creaks nearby.

Yes, there is definitely someone in the room with me.

Where is the dagger exactly? Is it right next to the bed? I didn't put it in the drawer, right? Fuck, I hope I didn't, because they're getting closer. I can feel it, but I can't hear them. I want to say it's because there's no one here but there's a twisting feeling in my gut and I don't know what to do other than flip around and reach for the dagger.

Only I don't make it because their blade is seen even through the dark, held high above the shadow's head then coming down fast. I roll onto the floor just as the sword impales the mattress. They don't hesitate to rip it out, hopping over the bed with ease to find me crawling under it to get to the otherside.

When their hands wrap around my ankles, I kick and struggle free, managing to make it to the bedside table. My hands are shaking when I grab the dagger, unsheathing it quickly even if I can't see a thing. I don't hear them either. Are they moving? Where the hell are they?

I don't know what to do. My hand presses to the wall as I try to move my way towards the door, holding the dagger outstretched. There's a brief moment where I think I see the glint of a blade in the dark so I duck. Sure enough, the blade impales itself into the wall followed by the unknown

assassin clicking their tongue in annoyance then their knee smashes into my temple.

I shout and fall to the floor, swinging the dagger haphazardly while screaming for the only person I can think of, "Soran!"

He's floors above me. I don't even know if he can hear, but someone must have heard. The assassin doesn't seem to care. They aren't rushing to get out of the room. My eyes are adjusting to the dark, but even then all I can make out is their form standing over me, sword held above their head and a twisted smile.

✝✝✝

I'VE DEFEATED THE COLD! *knock on wood* Had a cold for almost four days but now I am free~ Anyways, oh shit, someone broke into Wallie's room o.o Why and how?! Will Soran save the day?!

✝Sixteen✝

Is this really my end? Dying by some unknown assailant in a dark room for reasons unknown? I want to scream and shout and fight back, but the moment I move, thinking I'll at least stab the bastard once, their sword is coming down.

My eyes close waiting for the inevitable, but it turns out that death isn't inevitable, at least not today.

My bedroom door swings open. There's little light compared to earlier for there is a twisting black mass that whistles into the room, slamming the assailant to the ground. Their sword slides across the floor while I blink rapidly to the new light. A black figure with undertones of red rests atop the hooded man on the floor. The assassin reaches for the blade at his side but his neck is snapped before he even grabs the hilt.

Then it's over, just like that.

The assassin lay dead on the floor, neck twisted like a pretzel. I know who the dark figure is, but he doesn't look himself. When Lord Makai stands, he's taller with longer and leaner limbs made of pure shadow and only the red of his eyes and pointed teeth are seen. Each step he takes causes the floorboards to creak until he's kneeling before me, the shadows evaporating into the air until he looks his usual self, save for his eyes. They're pure red, glowing like stars.

"Are you all right?" He asks, holding out his hand in a manner that reminds me of the past. Once again, he saved my life. I'm grateful, but I'll probably be pissed off about it later.

"I'm ok," I answer, taking his hand that helps pull me up. He attempts to pull away but my grip only tightens. I'm still shaking. I'm still trying to catch up to what happened. "How—did you really hear me?"

"Yes. You're very loud."

"I had to be—"

"What's going on?! Is everyone al—oh my god!" Screams one of the hotel staff that comes running in, likely to check what's happening. She throws her hand over her mouth, eyes tearing up in horror upon seeing the corpse.

"It appears security here is rather lax," Lord Makai says. His eyes have returned to normal, but they're still unsettling to most. "Inform the authorities of the attempted attack on my butler. We will be in my room should they wish to speak."

"Your room?" I ask, but he's already walking out the door. Well, we are since I'm still holding his hand—shit, I'm still holding his hand! Now it's me attempting to let go, but Lord Makai doesn't allow it, continuing to ascend the stairs.

"Considering what happened, it's best you not sleep in the servant quarters." Then Lord Makai's nose wrinkles with disgust. I don't know what he's thinking, but he appears more distraught.

"Why...why do you think someone came for me?" I ask after we reach his room. The door shuts behind us and I drop into a chair, realizing then that I'm so exhausted I can't stand even if I want to.

"Why do you think?"

I really don't know, and that must be apparent on my face.

Lord Makai sighs, "If you haven't noticed, those around me do not last long. They leave or someone makes them leave. Even if their departure is not by my own doing, it still has to do with me."

"And that bothers you?" I ask, only realizing afterwards how such a question can be misinterpreted. I frown at the intense glare Lord Makai suddenly sends me.

"You humans truly do think so little of me," he says with such hatred hissed into his tone that it's terrifying.

"No, I-I didn't mean it like that!"

Lord Makai snorts and turns away, but that isn't fair. While I understand his frustration, I'm not going to let him determine his own truth that couldn't be any further from the real truth.

"Hey!" I shout, standing firm and causing Lord Makai to face me with a baffled expression. "I admit I didn't phrase that right, but I said I didn't mean it like that so that means I didn't mean it like that!"

"You phrased that horribly as well."

"Can't you not have the last word, for once?!" I'm shocked I even said that and even more shocked that Lord Makai hasn't chucked me out of the room yet. Since I have his attention though, I'm rolling with it. "I meant that you must know none of this is actually your fault. Those who hurt the innocent are to blame, especially for something as ridiculous as greed. And after so long, it's obvious you don't really get close to anyone so I'm surprised that it still gets to you."

I finally look away, staring at the ground with my hand rubbing the back of my neck when I mumble, "I-I can't imagine how I would feel if I were in your position, but by now I think I'd be too tired to care. That is what I meant, whether you choose to believe me or not."

The room is quiet. Lord Makai hasn't responded and I can't tear my eyes away from the floor. Then a pair of shoes step into my vision. There's no time to look up before a hand tousles my hair. The touch is surprisingly playful with Lord Makai ruffling my already messy hair as he says, "You're an odd one, Wallace."

Then he mirrors an action from days prior and presses his fingers beneath my chin, forcing me to look up. I definitely blush at how he's leaning towards me, our noses nearly brushing when he says, "But shout at me again and I'll give the most hated assignments at the estate to you."

"W-What? But that—no way! I had to shout or you would have ignored me."

"You're raising your voice, are you shouting at me again?"

I purse my lips. "No."

"That's what I thought."

He pats me on the head, something that only worsens my blush. However, when I look at him, he's wearing a playful smirk that I haven't seen before. Such a sight puts me at ease.

Sadly, the warmth of the room deteriorates with two knocks at the door followed by an officer shouting, "Lord Makai, we are here from the Isabe Police Department. Would you mind having a word with us?"

The moment their voices are heard, Lord Makai is scowling. His eyes grow cold and hand drops to his side. As he reaches the door, I peer at his back, not really listening to the officers now standing in the doorway. My gut is twisting into a knot at the memory of what I said a few days ago.

"You're a stubborn, cold and twisted man. You're bitter and pessimistic. You're moody and unforgiving, and I pity you."

Now I'm believing that Lord Makai was taken aback. Such harsh words likely did trouble him, and after tonight I know he cares, otherwise I would be dead and not the assassin. He wouldn't have listened to me and my disobedience would have been punished. I guess my memories are true. Lord Makai isn't nearly as bad as people make him out to be.

I wish others would give him a chance. I do think he deserves at least that, we all do.

After speaking with authorities, as all have said before, nothing is done. The corpse is retrieved and Lord Makai barely questioned. The officers mostly speak with me and I have little to say. They leave with probably as little information as when they arrived. Hearing nothing would be done is a lot different than seeing it. It leaves a vile taste in the mouth.

The following days go by with minor changes and, luckily, no further incidents. Rather than resting in the servant quarters, I remain on the couch (that is actually more comfortable than my previous bed) in Lord Makai's room. At night, I lay awake once or twice from nerves, although I'm uncertain whether it's from sharing a room with Lord Makai or what happened with the assailant.

But then Lord Makai lets out a deep breath in his sleep or turns in bed. Maybe it reminds me that I'm safest here or maybe I'm growing more comfortable with his presence than I'd like to admit, either way, it eases me into slumber. During the day, there are brief instances of Lord Makai teasing me with my hesitant return of that teasing. When there are no negative repercussions, I try again, always wondering where Lord Makai's line is that it seems I've yet to cross.

Dare I say it, the atmosphere has become almost friendly.

I've forgotten the rule of not smiling, but as time passes Lord Makai appears less and less bothered. Now, as we sit on the train for our return home, he doesn't even scowl at the smile I send his way when I ask, "Would you like some wine, Your Grace?"

"A briefcase didn't have to remind you. You're improving, Wallace."

"I think I liked it better when you didn't speak to me," I tease, smiling at Lord Makai's eye roll.

See? No scowl, no snarl or hiss, which is what I used to be presented with. I wonder what changed, was it what I said in the hotel room? Maybe Lord Makai is simply in a better mood after fixing all the issues in Isabe. I'm uncertain, but I hope this continues. My boss being in a good mood is always better for me! And, well, I much rather Lord Makai be comfortable with me...and everyone in general. Not specifically me, but in general.

Thankfully, there's no issues with the train ride either. Nothing like last time, but I think that is because Lord Makai remains awake. While I fall asleep once or twice, I never once catch Lord Makai dozing off. And when we finally return to the estate, it's nearly dark.

✝✝✝

Soran to the rescue! But also Wallie standing up for himself and not letting misunderstandings happen, hooray! Are you surprised Wallie was attacked? Do you think it will happen again? And how often do you think this has happened that Soran isn't even surprised and even gave Wallie a weapon just in case? Poor guy, he can't have a moment of peace for himself or his workers o.o

✝Seventeen✝

Higra is waiting for us at the door, bowing when we step through the threshold.

"Welcome back, Your Grace," she says, standing tall and glancing to me. I'm already helping to remove Lord Makai's coat, which pleases her enough to grin. "I hope business went well. If you wish, I can report the happenings of this week to you tomorrow. It is quite late."

Lord Makai nods. "Yes, inform me tomorrow. Have others unload my luggage. Wallace, you may return to your quarters, but you will continue Layne's duties until he returns in three days time."

"Of course, Your Grace." I offer up a smile.

Higra gives me a glare that disappears when she notes that Lord Makai isn't reacting to it. He simply turns and walks away.

Once gone, Higra hesitates to speak. She's watching me, mouth opening then closing but not speaking. I wait patiently, tilting my head to the side curiously.

"The trip, how was it?" Higra finally asks.

"I think it went well," I respond, uncertain of what she wishes to hear from me or what I am allowed to tell. "Lord Makai hasn't stated any grievances with me so I am assuming I did well enough."

"Good. If not, I am certain I will hear tomorrow. Goodnight then, Wallace, and welcome back."

"Thank you. Goodnight, Higra."

When returning to my room, I find Hael awake with his nose in a book, as usual. He smiles upon seeing me and offers a hello followed by a welcome

back. I'm not at all surprised that, while I'm unpacking, he asks, "How did it go?"

"Quite well actually, but—" I bite my lip at the memory of having been caught. Lord Makai told me to ask for assistance to read and my best bet is Hael.

With my back to him, I mumble out, "But I, uh, I was informed to request assistance in-in learning how to read."

"What?" Hael asks.

"I...am illiterate."

"Wallie, why didn't you say anything?" Hael doesn't sound like he'll tease me. I risk looking back to find him offering up a kind smile. "I didn't know how to read when I started working here either."

"Really? But you love to read."

"Yeah, but there was a past worker, Dellia, that taught a few of us in her spare time. Once I learned, I couldn't stop reading." Hael pats the book resting on the bed beside him. "I'll teach you, Wallie. Did His Grace get angry about it?"

"Thankfully not, but I am meant to learn so thank you."

"Not a problem. Anything else happen?"

"Someone tried to murder me in my sleep," I answer, sending Hael a smile over my shoulder to prove I'm alright. He looks unsettled though, eyes wide and mouth agape. "But Lord Makai arrived in time. He's not nearly as bad as people make him out to be."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, he didn't hesitate to rescue me, for one. Afterwards I remained close, although he may be moody, he's ultimately kind in his own way."

Hael's eyes are so wide I fear they may pop out of his skull. He hesitantly sets his book aside then asks, "How much do you know about Lord Makai?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's been alive for nearly 1,600 years so, are you aware of what he has done in that time?"

I hesitate in my unpacking to take a seat on the bed. I shake my head, growing concerned when Hael gives me an almost pitying expression.

"If Lord Makai treats you well then that's great and I truly am relieved to hear it, but it doesn't change what he is."

"And what is he? A monster?"

"Yes," Hael answers without hesitation. His eyes are firm yet frightened. He hesitates to speak, glancing this way and there before letting out a heavy sigh.

"After Emperor Elyon Makai and his Priests of Tethros fell to the Baylor's, Lord Makai was sent to live here as nothing could be done," says Hael. " But years later, he claimed the title of Archduke and retrieved what once belonged to the Makai family. Arguably, you could say he should have had it to begin with, but to do so he went on a rampage and murdered many, royals or not, in the palace save for Meysha, the youngest princess that was only 12 at the time. She was too young to reign, and so Lord Makai controlled Meysha like a puppet. Although she held the title of Queen, he was in complete control of more than just Aberia and over every member of the Baylor family long after the slaughter."

In the back of my mind, I fear what Hael said but the first question that comes to my mind is, where did this story come from? Who told it? Because the Baylor's also lied about Chandri, so who's to say they didn't lie about that either, but Hael has even more to say.

"You're aware of the Kasine Crevice, aren't you? Located just outside Vashna."

I nod, recalling passing the long bridge that is built over it. The crevice is so deep it looks like a tunnel straight to hell. It's simply dark, crumbled earth without any sign of life. Many claim it is haunted by the souls of the dead that get trapped there if they cannot find Aena's light. I always thought it was silly superstition, but Hael's mangled expression states he probably truly believes it.

"It wasn't always there," he explains. "A few years after Lord Makai's first assault, he went ballistic and repeated the offense all over again, only that time he killed every member of the Baylor family. Those that live today, such as our current king, are descendants of bastards that were allowed to live only because Lord Makai found it humorous that the bastards would rule next, never truly royal like the rest. Then he destroyed the palace and the Academy, tore through the streets of Vashna and when the Kasine militia from the South, controlled by Archdukes that were sent to help, they were wiped out in a single blow that scarred the earth."

Hael sighs. His shoulders slump forward and he presses his elbows to his knees. His eyes are sad when he asks, "No matter how well he treats you, or any of us, he's murdered more people than we can imagine. Throughout history he has harmed others too, countless events that you will read of in time. I think it's safe to say such offenses are never forgivable no matter how much time has passed. Do you understand what I'm saying, Wallie?"

I look away, unsure of how to respond. My limbs are stiff and chest heavy.

"I'm not saying this to upset you, although it is upsetting to hear. I just...after being here, I've seen others lost, and getting close to Lord Makai may result in your death as well. I think that's something none of us want." Hael leans back, picking up his book to flip the pages. He can't seem to sit still. "Enough about that though, not really the best conversation to have before bed."

I agree, but even when I try to tell Hael more about the trip, his words stick with me.

That night, when Hael has long since fallen asleep, I lay awake once more thinking of my time on the couch. Hearing Lord Makai sleeping soundly or

waking to find him, hair a mess and blankets wrapped around his waist from whatever odd ways he turned in his sleep, it's hard to believe that man did what Hael claimed. He looked like nothing more than an everyday man, even throughout the day, sitting in the carriage or working endlessly over piles of paper. However, when I think of the one that saved me, even if I'm grateful, I'm aware of the power he possesses so I know it can be the truth.

But the Baylor's have lied before. It's politics, and politicians are liars that speak more riddles than truth. What they say may hold some aspects of reality, but twist a word and it'll bend the whole meaning. Have another speak the tale and it will be different than another, a story is determined by the story teller so I seriously question the validity of such stories. But there is certainly no where to disprove them other than Lord Makai's own words, which I doubt he'll share.

If I ask, will he answer? And if he doesn't, what will I choose to believe?

I'm unsure and that uncertainty leaves me with little sleep that night, but I got about my duties per usual the following day.

Seeing Lord Makai leaves a hollow sensation within me. Words cannot describe such a sensation, only that it isn't good, it's perplexing and I'm left clueless as to what to do. The curiosity is not the only feeling eating away at me. The idea of it all being lies is too, that Lord Makai has been made out to be someone to fear simply for the well beings of others in power. If that is the case, I think he should actually slaughter them because it'd do the world a favor.

"Wallace," Lord Makai calls, eyeing me from his desk. "What are you doing?"

"Huh?"

"My lunch."

I look down, finding that I have Lord Makai's lunch only I've been standing in the doorway for sometime. I shake my head before quickly placing it atop his desk. He rarely leaves his office to eat, simply has me carefully set

aside his work. I've always wondered why, especially when the estate has such a lovely garden to eat in and a giant dining room, but whatever.

"Oh!" I snap my finger. "I have requested Hael to teach me how to read and write, as you told me to, My Lord."

"Good. I will not take you on another business trip until you're of use."

I scowl. "What's that supposed to mean? I think I've been very useful."

"You're mediocre at best." But he's smirking as he says that.

"Mediocre at best," I mock beneath my breath that results in Lord Makai giving me a warning glance. I smile sheepishly. "Another cup of tea, Your Grace?"

Lord Makai hums and I refill his glass. After he takes a drink, he looks to me with a questioning gaze. I smile from ear to ear, wondering what it is he could want. Once again, he doesn't seem to mind the smile. If anything, his shoulders relax and he sits comfortably in his seat.

"If you cannot read nor write, how are you keeping in contact with your mother?" Lord Makai suddenly asks.

"I'm not." I shake my head. "She passed away nearly a year ago."

"Oh, I am sorry for your loss."

"You don't sound very sorry," I tease, showing that mentioning her doesn't bother me as it once did. Thinking of her brings joy and immense sorrow, but I can manage.

"I suppose I've been around death enough that I've long forgotten the intensity of loss for others."

"So you have lost someone you've cared deeply about?"

Lord Makai hesitates in taking a drink, such a short hesitation it is barely noticeable, before replying, "No. I've never had anyone like that."

"Surely there must have been someone."

"No."

But it sounds like there was yet I've never heard of anyone. Then again, I never heard what Hael told me last night either. I wonder who this person might be, what became of them and what relationship they had. A lover? A friend? Family? Oh shit, maybe the dog? Hey, I had a cat at the farm and when he passed away I was miserable! I best not bring that up.

The mood is changing though. Lord Makai went from playful to unsettled. It's odd how I see that now. His brow is furrowed as it once was so I'm quick to change the subject.

"Could you write your name for me, Your Grace?" I ask, smiling at the arched brow he gives me in response.

"Excuse me?" He almost sounds insulted.

"Your name. After Hael teaches me, I'd like to learn to write and read your name."

Lord Makai is quiet. His stare softens, but he says nothing.

"I admit I can read your last name, Makai, but your full name is another story. I promise I dare not show you until I can write as neatly as you do." I laugh at such a promise because Lord Makai has been properly taught since a young age. His writing is immaculate, cursive and flourishing on paper like art itself. It'll take me half my life probably to live up to it, but I think the request has settled the mood.

Lord Makai's brow is no longer furrowed. He's quiet, but I wouldn't say upset. He looks away, says nothing, but grabs a piece of paper and writes out his name. Except he's very careful and spaces out the letters so I recognize them easier before handing the page over without looking at me as he says, "You best not show my name in chicken scratch. Write it properly or I'll never let you write it again."

"How will you know? Do you plan to watch over me forever?" I tease, but I should have waited to do so after I took the paper because Lord Makai pulls away, holding the paper near his chest while he glares.

"I'm teasing, Your Grace." I hold out my hands. "I promise I will not bring dishonor to your name."

"Hmm."

"I will write it so beautifully that even you will be jealous."

Lord Makai snorts. "That will never happen."

Yet he hands the paper over. My heart skips a beat. I feel foolish for it, even more so for being so happy about something as simple as a name. I don't plan to show Hael, after what he said last night he clearly doesn't think I should be closer with Lord Makai...yet here I am, seemingly getting closer. I don't think I want to stop and I don't know how I feel about that either.

✝✝✝

Decided to give an extra update this week since I'm so far ahead on my patreon ^^ You'll get the usual update on Wednesday as well! Oh boy, a longer chapter with some more info! Do you believe what Hael said or are you more like Wallie, a bit disbelieving? Do you still think there's some truth to the matter? But also, how fucking cute are Soran and Wallie? Because seriously, they're adorable >.< hope you enjoyed the update! ^^

✝Eighteen✝

Hael kept the books and cards he used when learning to read. Admittedly, it was a tad humiliating to see the children's book, but we all have to start somewhere. They are certainly easier to read than the monstrosities Hael now takes in. Besides, I even have to learn the basics and so nearly every night after work Hael goes over something new with me.

With Layne back, he is at Lord Makai's side again. In the back of my mind, I'm a little upset, but I choose to ignore it. Layne is the best choice for the job. He is of more help to Lord Makai and, well, I didn't want to work at his side in the first place...(is what I have to keep telling myself.)

In order not to think about that, I focus on the task at hand. When I'm not busy or I'm alone, I pull out the flash cards that make me smile each time. I can read something at least. These little cards that are simply teaching me the absolute basics bring me great joy. The flashcards have pictures of objects so I've found that it helps since I already know how to pronounce it. Hael says I'm doing well considering it's only been two weeks.

I think I'm doing well too. At the very least, I am proud of myself. I can't write a letter or even my full name...but I've almost got Lord Makai's name down!

I flush just thinking about it, remembering the papers in my room where I've written his name over and over in hopes to make it look nice, but my writing truly is chicken scratch. It's horrid squiggles and I keep messing up O and A or M and N. Writing is hard!

But I'll show him one day and...

And what? He'll be proud of me? I can work at his side more? Because I'm not entirely sure what I'm doing this for yet I continue to practice at it the most. The thought of handing Lord Makai a paper simply with his name

that I've written and seeing him smile or telling me, "Good job," somehow makes my heart flutter.

Shit.

I stash the cards in my back pocket.

Higra orders me to help some of the gardners out back. During the winter there are few trees that grow, but we've had great snowfall the last few weeks. Apparently a lot of snow has piled up and Higra rather have it shoveled then remain on structures such as the gazebo and fountains.

The air is cold, reddening my nose and ears almost immediately. Though I wear a heavy coat, the wind still has a nip that makes us all shiver. I'm not the only one called, a few other butlers are at work shoveling sidewalks and dusting off fountains. Even in winter, the garden is lovely with ice cicles hanging from trees and untouched snow settled atop sleeping gardens. The fountains are eerily beautiful. Without water the statues appear almost solemn, reaching towards the sky for freedom or settled in a deep slumber. And the pond located around back is completely frozen. A line of rope was put around it just before winter to remind everyone of where it is once the snow falls. It blends in with everything else.

It isn't until we're back inside that Higra thanks us for the work then says, "We must keep an exceptional watch over both the interior and exterior of the estate. In a weeks time, the High Priest and Grand Knight of Aena will be visiting."

What? But Lord Makai never gets visitors!

"No others?" asks a butler with his hand raised.

"Their escorts will be alongside them, so a total of six guests. Each and every room must be spotless. Even the unused guest bedrooms. Nothing will be out of place and no trouble will be caused. We must treat them with the utmost respect and care. Should any of you bring dishonor to this household, know that the best case scenario is your expulsion from the

estate, understood?" Higra looks from one to the other, her gaze hesitating on me for a moment.

What's that supposed to mean?

"Return to your duties. Tomorrow, new assignments will be given out, such as who will be in charge of the guests personal rooms."

Higra waves us off, walking away with her head held high. It isn't until she's out of view that the man beside me, I think his name is Eveten, looks towards the group of us to ask, "Both the High Priest and Grand Knight are coming here, what do you think that means?"

"Suppose they're trying to get rid of Lord Makai?" Another asks, shivering in place, and it has nothing to do with our return from the cold.

"They would bring more if that were the case, and I'd like to think they would evacuate us. I sure hope this doesn't mean trouble."

I wish I could partake in the conversation, but I know nothing either. It's as shocking to me as it is everyone else.

Sure, Lord Movell has visited before and Lord Makai clearly disliked his presence, but both the High Priest and Grand Knight? Why? Both are some, if not the, strongest people of this nation and in league with King Baylor. Surely it isn't as Eveten said and they're coming to attempt another assassination on Lord Makai. When will they grow tired of such a ridiculous strategy?

There are no answers. That worries me.

Throughout the remainder of the day, I'm lost in thought. Considering what happened during the business trip, there's a chance that the assassin was sent by the Baylor's. That would explain the visit, they are upset with the failure and wish for another attempt. Not necessarily towards me, but someone in the castle seeing as Lord Makai claims to be upset either way.

Like this, I'm starting to wonder if it's how Lord Makai feels regularly. Always wondering the reason for a visit or someone's concern, assuming it is not what it seems. A friendly face is as dangerous as a dagger. They'll stab you in the back should they get the chance. Such thoughts are nerve wracking, maddening. Lord Makai has to be exhausted, no wonder he's so moody.

Work takes a bit longer today than usual. It's dark when I finish cleaning up the west side of the second floor. Before I make it to the stairs though, I spot Lord Makai at the end of the hall stepping out of the library. Layne must be finished for the day, otherwise Lord Makai probably would have sent him to get it. Or maybe he wished for a walk, who knows, but when Lord Makai raises his gaze it locks with my own.

"Wallace," he says. I hate that I freeze in place because of it, having not heard him in over a week.

Lord Makai is walking towards me when he says, "Appears you've been working hard."

He gestures behind me. I spin around, seeing nothing, but the sudden movement causes the cards in my back pocket to fall. I jump in shock. I completely forgot that I had them.

Leaning down, I swiftly retrieve the cards to stash in my pocket once more.

"Uh, I have been practicing as much as I can, Your Grace," I respond with a bow. He's standing in front of me now. "It's difficult, but quite rewarding."

"Keep it up and you may yet become a valuable butler."

"Have you looked outside?" I gesture to one of the windows. "I helped shovel all that snow. Do you know how exhausting it was?"

"Haven't a clue. I don't tire easily." He smirks and my face warms because...because I swear there's a double meaning there. I'm definitely ignoring it.

"Sorry not all of us have super powers." I cross my arms stubbornly. "But I am very valuable. I think you're just worried I'll be so great after learning to read and write that you won't be able to stop yourself from complimenting me."

Lord Makai snorts. "Even your dreams could not fabricate such a ludicrous situation."

"Using big words won't make what I said any less true."

"Which of those words do you consider to be big?"

"Don't change the subject."

Lord Makai chuckles. Actually chuckles. I thought the sound would be deep or almost frightening, yet it's anything but. A soft, warm, and cheerful action, no matter how small. Suddenly, I want to do everything in my power to hear it again and again and again.

I stare in utter confusion, which Lord Makai doesn't seem to care about because he goes on to ask, "Did you just finish? It's late."

"Uh, yes, I admit I was out of sorts today."

He doesn't ask why, but he doesn't leave either. Lord Makai stands before me with a quiet stare that somehow encourages me to say, "Higra told us that the High Priest and Grand Knight of Aena will be visiting the estate in a week. It worries me."

"Why?"

"After the failed assassination in Isabe, I worry that they are upset and both are coming in hopes to cause you harm."

"I am not someone they can harm," Lord Makai responds like it's no big deal.

"But that does not give them the right to try," I argue immediately with a scowl. "Just because you cannot die that does not mean others have the

right to hurt you. That is the truly ludicrous situation."

Lord Makai hesitates to respond. I'm not sure what to make of his expression, it's rather apathetic, yet somehow not. I want to say he's comfortable or relaxed, which is odd considering the topic of discussion. But I don't have the confidence to believe in my own eyes.

"Their visit is nothing you should concern yourself with," Lord Makai finally says with a heavy sigh. Judging by his sudden scowl, he isn't pleased with their promised visit either. Although he's scowling, I know it isn't pointed at me. "It's business, nothing more, although your consideration will not get you a pay raise if that's what you're hoping for."

I growl. "I'd smack you if I could."

"Even if I allowed it, you wouldn't be able to catch me."

"Implying you'd run from a smack? Are you that scared of—"

Lord Makai actually shoves me back by pressing two fingers to my forehead and pushing. I stumble away, laughing while rubbing my head.

"Get something to eat. It's well past your bedtime," he says, waltzing up the stairs afterwards.

"If anyone here gets cranky because of lack of sleep, it's you!"

Lord Makai doesn't respond, but I'm still smiling, so much so that it kind of hurts. I press my hands to my face. Damn, I'm really warm. This is getting out of hand, isn't it? I'm pushing the limits. Eventually Lord Makai won't allow it. I'm not even sure why he's allowing it now. Maybe because so few actually converse with him? Obviously I'm flattered to be one, even if he's an annoying sack of shit (sometimes), but the time will come eventually when this friendly atmosphere will dissipate, right?

Such a thought puts a knot in my stomach. I'm not hungry anymore so I return to my room. Hael is obviously there and we pick up where the

teaching left off the previous night. However, as the week drags on, there is little time to practice thanks to the soon to be arriving guests.

✝✝✝

These two are just too cute >.< I love their interactions, I hope you do too! But what do you think about this sudden visit from the High Priest and Grand Knight? Do you think it has to do with the failed assassination attempt or is there something else afoot?

✝Nineteen✝

House Makai is in a state of organized chaos. Higra is more than stern. She's down right vicious, having no issue scolding us for spotting a speck of dirt or a single cobweb in the corner of an unused room. Nothing is left unpolished or wrinkled. Every sheet and blanket is tucked in neatly. Every window, chandelier, and mirror glistens more than the freshly fallen snow. The estate somehow blossoms into a cold beauty that probably damn near perfectly resembles the day it was given to the Makai family. It's that spotless.

I'd say I'm proud, but hearing that I will be attending to Lord Movell's room only makes me more exhausted. Suppose it isn't odd since I did it last time, but that is not only more work for me when I am already exhausted, but I'm also working for a man that is a possible threat. He and the royals, even the Grand Knight, could be threats to Lord Makai, to all of us on the estate.

Never would I have imagined that I would come to fear those that are meant to protect. It leaves a cold feeling in my gut, an anxiety that will not simmer down. Though I tell myself not to worry, that isn't how nerves work. The closer the day gets, the more anxious I become.

When the entourage finally arrives, pulling up to the estate while we servants line the corridors dressed immaculately, anxiety turns to sudden dread that overtakes me; enough to make my knees shake. I take a deep breath to calm the nerves. Again, it doesn't work.

The doors swing open. We all bow at the sound of heavy footsteps and Lord Makai's presence at the top of the stairs.

Wouldn't they normally greet each other in the foyer? I wonder if Lord Makai situated himself on high ground as a sign of superiority. That's a thing, isn't it? I don't know, but it feels like it is.

"Lord Movell, Lady Connte, welcome to House Makai," says His Grace, although he doesn't sound all that welcoming.

"Thank you for the warm welcome, Your Grace," Lord Movell responds. "And we apologize for visiting under such short notice. Your kindness to grant us entrance is much appreciated."

My back is starting to ache, but the servants are not to raise their heads until the nobles walk by. Their feet are in view. As Higra said, there are six in total, each strutting by with clear determination. Somehow even their walking gives off confidence that many don't dare show before His Grace.

When they are out of my personal view, I may rise, and my eyes immediately fixate on their silhouettes heading up the stairs.

Lord Movell sticks out like a sore thumb with his deep blue hair and golden eyes against pale skin. As the High Priest, he is dressed in royal robes of white with golden trim. The silhouette of Goddess Aena rests on his back, reaching up with her hands outstretched to form a glowing orb above her. The train of the robe flutters behind him when he walks and his golden earrings glisten with every turn of his head. He walks with a white staff, slightly gnarled with a golden gem perched within twisted roots at the top.

The gem gives off a soft white light. Lumen is clearly seen coursing through the crystal. While Lord Movell himself doesn't make me feel at ease, the magic surely does. While vilis has a negative affect, lumen has the exact opposite. It makes the room feel just a bit lighter.

With him are two men in similar robes but far less gaunty; without the gold and Goddess Aena on the back. They are simply white with a mere golden sash around their necks. One man is tall and lanky, the other short and rather plain. Neither accompanied Lord Movell during his last visit, but based on their attire they are obviously Priests of Aena as well. The tall one wears a sword on his back while the other holds a staff as plain as he is, brown and nothing more.

The woman though, I can only assume she is Lady Connte, the Grand Knight, for she is dressed with a heavy jacket a deeper red than her hair. A

sword is tethered to her side, grand and beautiful, a similar depiction of Goddess Aena etched into the silver handle. Her boots are made of fine leather while her eyes are narrow and cold, as cold as Lord Makai's I'd dare to say, and nearly white in color, contrasting greatly with the deep brown of her skin.

With her is one male and one female knight, dressed in light leather armor. The male appears rather anxious while the female is almost jittery in nature. But their eyes hold an air of confidence even in an unfamiliar environment while also standing before a man that could kill them all if he so desired.

Having such visitors is truly stressing me out. They could likely wipe out the entire estate one by one. No one other than Lord Makai can use magic here. I doubt if someone gave me a book I could even cast a basic spell.

"If you are aware of how short of a notice it was, perhaps next time you should handle your affairs more professionally. This is not a hotel you may frequent whenever you wish," Lord Makai says without batting an eye.

"As rude as ever, Your Grace," Lady Connte responds with a roll of her eyes. She presses her hand to her hip, lips pulled back into a snarl to rival Lord Makai's. "May we speak in your study? I'm sure you wish for us to get out of your hair as quickly as possible."

"I wish for nothing more." Lord Makai gestures behind him. "This way."

With that, the nobles ascend the stairs, disappearing moments later. Higra and Layne follow quietly behind, after Higra reminds us all to be on our best behavior, of course. But even without the nobles in view, I'm anxious.

Why are they here?

Lord Makai said not to worry, but I can't keep myself from doing so. Perhaps if they brought mere butlers or maids, I'd be able to take a breath. Instead, the Grand Knight brought two warriors and the High Priest was followed with two priests. They're all fighters, regardless of Lord Makai's immortality, they must be able to defend themselves against the best of the best.

It truly seems the royals and the military are more harmful than the so called murderous vampire. Really, what have I gotten myself into?

✝✝✝

Next chapter will be in third person. A few will be sprinkled throughout the series. I'll always let you guys know! So, we've met the High Priest and Grand Knight but why are they there? What could they need to speak to Soran about? Does Wallie really need to worry?

✝Twenty✝

Third Person P.O.V

Soran sits across from a bored Reiner Movell and frustrated Silva Connte. The office is silent, save for the flutter of the curtains when a breeze comes in from the open terrace doors. A letter sits innocently on the coffee table between the couches, a letter Silva sat down earlier and Soran refuses to acknowledge.

The royal seal, a golden crown encircled by vines with red roses, is pressed into the paper. Seeing it puts Soran on edge. He is in a foul mood, somehow worse than when he woke up that morning.

"Don't be like this, Soran. You had to have seen this coming, you did murder eleven people," says Reiner with a sigh yet still wears a smile. Soran would argue that is the priest's most annoying trait, which is saying a lot since he has plenty more.

Soran snorts. "Eleven that stole and would not have faced the consequences had I sent them to trial."

"You always say that yet I've never seen you attempt a trial," Silva spits, only to be shot down immediately with a quick retort.

"In your lifetime, no, but perhaps I should grab a history book to remind you of all the times I tried in the past." Soran rests one leg elegantly over the other, hands folded atop his knees when Silva growls.

"It seems the Grand Knight has forgotten her history lessons. Does she truly only care about how fast she can swing her sword around? How unfortunate."

Silva reaches for her blade, lurching forward as she does. "You rotten bastard!"

Reiner grips her wrist, pressing gently as a command to sit. Silva's brow is furrowed, eyes flickering with rage when she reluctantly returns to her seat. With an annoyed grunt, she turns her nose up while Reiner speaks calmly, "Now, now, let's play nice children."

"Says the most childish one of all," Soran tacks on. Now it's his turn to smirk and Reiner to scowl.

Finally, Soran takes the letter, but doesn't even read it over when he says, "If the king wishes me to pay a fine, so be it, but know that your request will be denied by doing so."

"Who says we have a request?" hisses Silva, but Reiner is already pressing his fingers into his temple. His gold eyes travel the room as if he's looking for an escape from their tedious discussion.

"You always act so shocked, Silva. By now it should be obvious I am always one step ahead of you." Soran waves his hand through the air. A trail of red light glistens at his fingertips, dancing through the air to shimmy a roll of parchment loose from the shelves. That parchment floats to the table, stretching out flat to reveal a world map.

"First, there is Karsissia." Soran taps a pointed nail against the map, right over top the red castle encircled by a shadow in the Empire of Yvlacna. "There are rumors she's been acting up, although that is by no means odd for her. She does like her dramatics."

"If dramatics is what you wish to call her slaughters," says Silva. Her eyes darken at the mere mention of the eldest vampire.

"But she has never paid us any mind, however, there is a chance that might have changed, isn't there?"

Soran smirks at how the two stiffen. A cold chill hangs in the air. The breeze has stopped, as if the weather itself sensed the tense atmosphere.

Soran drags his nail slowly to Aberia, now tapping against Gaeling Woods in the furthest northern territory resting along the Dead Zone; a once

plentiful land fought over between the kingdom of Aberia and empire of Leschandeal. Now it sits as a wasteland from the countless battles, misuse of magic and, quite recently, a new home to The Unborn.

The Unborn are priests, knights, and magic users that turned from Aena's light and lumen to the dark power promised from Tethros and his vilis. Monstrous magicians that have lost their humanity and thus are banished from any form of civilization.

"The Unborn are gathering, are they not?" Soran asks, although it is rhetorical. He already knows the answer. "In droves, so they say. Too many to give a figure and more than enough to garner the attention of our king. It is unlikely Karsissia is in league with them, she dislikes working with others, but I imagine it is most troubling to have both odd happenings at once."

"If you're aware, why have you not conversed with His Royal Majesty?" asks Reiner even if he is suspecting what the answer may be. His hands are already clenching in his lap, preparing himself for the rude retort he knows is to come.

"Why should I speak to him? He should figure it out for himself."

Silva clicks her tongue. "Disrespectful rat."

She says nothing more, leaving the talking to Reiner since he can at least keep his cool.

"You are the only one here that has ever met Karsissia," Reiner replies. His elbow rests on the arm of the chair, head now resting against his palm. "She is a vampire, like you."

"Karsissia and I are nothing alike. If we were, you'd all be dead."

Silva groans. Her voice is laced with sarcasm when she says, "Yes, we are so very grateful to have been blessed with the ever so kind Lord Makai rather than The Red Lady."

"You should be."

Reiner holds out his hand to put a stop to Silva before she can even start. Once she and Soran fall into their bickering, it's difficult to stop. Reiner made the mistake of comparing them to siblings once. Soran and Silva agreed for the one (and likely only) time in their lives and hit Reiner simultaneously, so the two lumps on his head were somewhat worth the comment.

"When such issues arise, you should inform His Majesty because you are a part of their world," explains Reiner. "Something unnatural and created by them, users of magic we know little about, only that it is not to be taken lightly. Imagine if they manage to bring about more vampires—"

Soran snickers. "Wouldn't you all be in trouble?"

"This is a serious matter!" Silva shouts, slamming her hand against the arm of the couch. "Stop being a smug bastard and take this seriously."

"Oh, I am, otherwise I wouldn't have allowed either of you in, but taking it seriously does not mean I will be compliant. These matters are your own. The Priests and Knights of Aena are guardians of the kingdom so The Unborn are your matters, not mine."

"In this instance, it is a matter for all," Reiner argues, dropping his hands into his lap and leaning forward. His eyes are stern and voice low. "We are made of lumen. We use it. You are of vilis and so you are the one best suited to at least see what The Unborn are up to. They haven't been like this for a very long time."

"Even you can't deny it's odd," Silva says, trying to keep herself calm but just seeing Soran puts her teeth on edge. It's the eyes, red as blood, more haunting than any battlefield. It puts her senses on high alert even when he rests comfortably.

"They are murderers and thieves, greedy people willing to take the worst route to get to their desires, but working alongside each other like this in

these numbers, it isn't right. The first and only time we saw such coordination was—" Silva stops herself.

Her eyes narrow, as do Soran's, but for different reasons. Silva is frustrated and Soran dare not admit that it hurts to think about. But Reiner cares not for those feelings. He cuts right to the point.

"Was with your father, Emperor Elyon, and we all know how that turned out." Reiner gestures to Soran, the monster more created than born. "There is a chance they are attempting to mimic what your father started; eternal youth, or something else equally as ridiculous. Or maybe it is nothing at all and they are only wishing to get by with more numbers, but we must figure that out before it is too late."

"And you wish for me to do it?" Soran asks, raising a brow. "I am not a military dog that the king commands."

"No need to express that, you have always made your position abundantly clear."

Soran sits impatiently, glaring at Reiner to let him know he isn't in the mood for the priest's games. Whatever he had to say, he better say it quick before Soran changed his mind and kicked all of them out.

"His Majesty wishes for you to examine what our men have managed to salvage from the attacks. There are artifacts, spells, bodies and more. My priests and I have looked over what we could but have come to no conclusion, at least not one that could be as precise as yours. If you do this, His Majesty will ignore your transgressions."

Soran rolls his eyes.

Regardless of his answer, the imperial family holds no true power over him, although he certainly can annoy Soran with unwelcome guests, continuous reminders of a fine, a summoning, or another attempt to pass even more laws to limit Soran's businesses, all of which the duke would preferably avoid. Playing nice has never been either of their forte's, but there is no denying Soran is as displeased with the idea of more vampires as everyone

else. There's certainly already enough monsters in the world, no need to add more.

"So be it." Soran waves his hand dismissively. "I presume all my inspections will be under your supervision, Lord Reiner?"

"But of course. Admittedly, I would prefer you come to the Academ—"

"No." Soran's eyes narrow. That cold chill worsens so that even Silva shivers. "It will be done here or nowhere at all."

Silva huffs, but Reiner nods. He has no issue with that request and so agrees, but not before saying, "You know, this would be much simpler if you simply agreed to teach us what you know of vilis."

"Why? Hopeful you'll find a way to rid yourselves of me?" Soran abruptly stands. He adjusts his cufflinks while peering down at his guests, chin held high. "Even if I had the desire to teach you, a fool such as yourself would never be able to comprehend such complexities."

Silva glares, once again ready to pounce but Soran is already stepping out of the room. It isn't until he's gone that Reiner's smile is replaced with a cold stare. Silva isn't much different, arms crossed and brows furrowed. It isn't until Reiner waves his hand and a white light flashes in the room that Silva knows it is safe to speak. Soran will not hear them.

"I hate that we have to come to him for help. Are you certain we must?" Silva hisses. "We can handle The Unborn. My knights and I can wipe them out."

"The issue is not just their numbers, Silva," Reiner responds with a heavy sigh. He falls back into the couch, pinching the bridge of his nose as he does. "Vilis is dangerous, tamper with it only a little and you may be lost, otherwise I would do this all myself. We must know what they are up to, even if it turns out to be nothing, that would actually be for the best."

"His Majesty shouldn't have to request the help of a blood thirsty beast."

"Yes, the situation is most unfortunate." Reiner stands, grabbing his staff and adjusting his robes. "Let us inform His Majesty then. I will return to the Academy to bring the evidence here. You keep your eye on things."

Silva nods, her voice but a low whisper when she responds, "If he makes a move, I will let you know, Lord Movell."

✝✝✝

Gonna be busy tomorrow so you're getting an update today instead :) But well, well, well, they actually came for a serious visit. We've learned of The Unborn and there's been a mention of another vampire! What do you think The Unborn are up to, if anything? Do you think Soran knows more about dark magic then he's leading others to believe? Are you surprised the king asked Soran for help or that he agreed to help? The story is slowly unfolding~

✝Twenty-One✝

Wallie P.O.V

Even with the arrival of the guests, the estate is not in any less of an uproar. Actually, it might have worsened.

Higra is her usual stern self, but she's quadruple checking everything. Although everything has been thoroughly cleaned then inspected for perfection, we are to repeat our work to make sure it remains that way. I've always been a fast worker, but this pace is nearly unbearable so I'm not sure if I'm relieved or concerned to see Elamir when she finds me and says, "Higra asked that you help in the kitchen. With so many guests, we're rather understaffed."

Elamir disappears without hearing my response, not that I would argue. Especially with how frantic she is, hair sticking out of her bonnet from rapid movements, even her breathing is a bit erratic. She's rushing, we all are, so I bolt to the kitchens in hopes to help.

Sure enough, there is plenty of work to be done in the kitchens. With six guests there must be both breakfast, lunch and dinner prepared as well as snacks and drinks should they wish to munch throughout the day or evening. And they eat far more than Lord Makai does, which still confuses me because I wish to know if the food actually does anything for him!

Anyways, I'm not much for creating a full blown meal, but the basics such as chopping vegetables or stirring a bowl of whatever this brown stuff is is doable. (Gravy maybe?)

The kitchen staff are not workers I see as often so I'm a little taken aback with how quick the gossip begins. Perhaps this is the place it always comes from because everyone seems to be pro's at it.

"Say, anyone have any clues why our guests are here?" The head cook asks while moving about the kitchen with, dare I say it, inhuman speed. "The

High Priest brought yet another carriage in today. None have seen what was within, but it is clear it's not another guest."

"All I heard is that it's royal business, otherwise it would have been the High Priest or the Grand Knight sent rather than both," a butler responds, swinging open the cupboards for who knows what.

"The High Priest and Grand Knight are in the king's pocket so their business is always royal business, but you make a fair point." The girl beside me decorating some frozen desert smiles. "However, I heard The Red Lady is on the move."

"The Red Lady?" I ask, hesitating momentarily in my work.

Great, now I'm in on the gossip.

"You haven't heard of her?" One of the men asks yet he runs right by me to take drinks upstairs. Guess he'll be filled in when he returns? I'm almost impressed with how the kitchen staff gossip, it's like they built their own system!

"You know of the other vampires, don't you?" Another worker inquires from across the room. He doesn't even look back at me, turning the meat over the roaring fire while speaking. "There's three in total, after all."

"I know there's three, but I don't know much about the other two," I respond, looking to the girl next to me since she brought up The Red Lady.

"Well, obviously there's Lord Makai." She gestures up as if to point to him. "He's the youngest and, by word of mouth, the weakest."

The weakest? Seriously? I can't imagine one stronger though...

"Then there's Quelen Jakeen, a nomad that is nearly 9,000 years old. They say he wanders wherever he pleases, being seen and heard very little. There's even disagreements upon his appearance so the claimed sightings are nothing more than rumors. If you ask me, he's the best out of the three, never causing trouble."

I want to ask who "they" are and how they know he's a wanderer if so little is known of him, but she's still speaking and I doubt she has an answer anyways. That's why this is called gossip and not facts.

"The Red Lady, however, is somehow better known yet even more mysterious."

Although everyone is working, it's clear they're listening in, as if this is a tale told among friends around a fire. I suppose it kind of is.

"Karsissia O'Shear is her name, and there are those that believe she is so ancient that she has been here since the beginning of time. No one knows her age or how she came to be, only that she is the most powerful being this world has ever seen. She's wiped out armies in a single evening and flown across the seas without rest. Even kings and emperors bow before her. She lives in the kingdom of Yvlacna beyond the sea and does as she wishes."

"So why is she called The Red Lady?" I ask. "Because she's a vampire?"

"Because her castle is a horror made of red stone that sparkles like fire in the sunlight. And her hair is as red as the blood she drinks and bathes in, a true creature of horror that is not only aware but also proud of her condition." The girl shakes her head with a heavy sigh. "Although I fear Lord Makai, I am grateful it is he we have rather than Karsissia. If Lord Makai is a monster then she is the mother of monsters."

"Wait," calls the man turning the spick. "How do you know all these details?"

"Because my brother is in The Academy to become a priest!" Claims the girl with a proud smile. Understandably so, to go to The Academy is a great honor. "As part of his training he must learn of the vampires seeing as they are the greatest threat to our world."

"Are they though?" I inquire, earning a few looks of disbelief from others. "If Karsissia is as old as they say, and Quelen and Lord Makai are here, then why hasn't calamity already fallen?"

This stumps the girl, as well as others. Few start to mumble under their breath, trying to come up with an answer, but eventually the girl simply says, "I don't know why. Perhaps calamity is not as severe as we believe. We imagine fire raining from the sky or the ground cracking beneath our feet, but maybe that is not the calamity they speak of. Maybe it is fear instilled among the people or power taken by those we cannot defend ourselves against. Although there are only three, these three could rule us all with an iron fist if they desired, isn't that already calamity?"

She certainly has a point there, although I'm tempted to point out that just because someone is capable of doing terrible deeds that doesn't make them "a calamity." Every person in this room could kill someone if they wished. Even our own royal family can rule us without mercy if they desired therefore they are as capable of being "calamity" as a vampire is. It's the choice of not doing it that matters, but I know they are set in their ways so I simply nod.

"I wonder if Lord Makai has ever met the other two?" The head cook hums, bringing up a question I am now very curious of. "Since they are the only three, there must be some desire to connect."

"I don't know if I would want to meet Karsissia," the girl says with a shiver. "She doesn't sound all that friendly."

That's an understatement. Bathing in blood isn't something anyone "friendly" would ever do.

"Hey, weren't you saying The Red Lady was making a move?" Another worker asks, recalling the beginning of the conversation that even I forgot about.

"Oh right!" The girl snaps her fingers. "Yeah, yeah, my brother was saying the priests have been anxious. Rumors claim civilians are disappearing far more rapidly than usual in Yvlacna, along with the sudden appearance of strange creatures and occurrences, like hallucinations and powerful storms, all of which are taking place near her residence."

"But why would she start so much trouble now? What more could she want?" Asks the cook with a heavy sigh. "She has all the power she desires. Surely there is not worse she can do."

Another worker squeals suddenly, "Don't jinx us!"

"Sorry, sorry, but I don't know if it has to do with The Red Lady."

"Why else would both the High Priest and Grand Knight visit? If it has to do with rebels or war, the Grand Knight is understandable, but the High Priest wouldn't get involved unless absolutely necessary so it makes sense if the threat is one that is of dire enough importance for both," argues the girl.

Yep, the kitchen is definitely the place for gossip. Somehow they are working full steam while speaking of rumors. At this point, I'm starting to tune out since it's the same argument on repeat. Besides, I've got a lot more information now, finally learning of the other vampires that I've heard so little of.

I am curious if Lord Makai has met either of them. Like the cook said, there are only three. I imagine eternity gets lonely. If Karsissia is as old as they claim then any she may have grown close to have long since perished, same as Quelen. These three are the only ones that do not change as time passes. Surely there's some desire for a connection, but I've never heard or seen any sign of the other two.

So many questions that Lord Makai is unlikely to answer. Perhaps once I learn to read I can pick up some books? The library here is open for use to the servants, although I am uncertain if Lord Makai has books on vampires. He may see them as more of an annoyance, either way, I make a mental note to do some research one day.

✝✝✝

Another early update because I am doing the last of my Christmas shopping tomorrow. Don't know how long I'll be so you're getting this today! And, oh boy, quite a lot of gossip in this chapter. We now know of the three vampires; Karsissia, Quelen and Soran, and supposedly

Soran is the weakest! =O Do you believe that? Do you think the three of them associate in secret? And what could all the commotion at Karsissia's mean, does it have to do with The Unborn?

✝Twenty-Two✝

After the meals are prepared, I am given leave. Of course there is more to attend to. I must inspect Lord Movell's room once more, but the room is not empty when I arrive. Lord Movell is there, sitting in the ebony chair before the fire with a book in his lap. Upon seeing me, he smiles warmly.

"Lord Movell, I apologize for barging in."

"It is not an issue. I left the door open, after all," he responds with a soft laugh. He gestures for me to enter, which I do after shutting the door. "Your name is Wallace, correct?"

"Yes, My Lord. I'm honored you remember me."

"But of course, you attended to me during my last visit, and you did witness me being thrown into a wall."

I bite my lip to hold back a chuckle, at least until Lord Movell laughs, proving that I may do so as well. Nodding, I respond, "Yes, I did see that. I'm glad you were alright."

"Don't worry, such a little thing can't harm me, although I appreciate the concern." He flicks his fingers in a request to come even closer. I do, and then take a seat when he gestures for me to do so.

Nerves settle in my gut. The atmosphere is tense. I wonder if Lord Movell feels it too or I'm just being paranoid. I try my best not to squirm in place especially with his gaze fixated on me.

Act natural, just act natural, Wallie.

"I admit, there is another reason I recall you so easily," he says, causing the breath to hitch in my throat from concern. "Your accent, although clearly you attempt to cover it, I sense that you are from Chandri, are you not?"

I stiffen at the question, recalling Lord Makai's order to not speak of my memories. Lord Movell may be smiling, but something about his gaze is off. I sense he wishes for me to slip up and admit that I know more than I let on. Why else would he bring up Chandri?

"Yes, I am from Chandri," I answer, well aware that he can simply look up my previous home if he wished. It's better to tell only a small lie than a big one.

"Such an unfortunate incident. I'm guessing you were quite young when the attack happened?"

"Yes, only eight years old, My Lord. My mother and I were lucky to have escaped before the village was overtaken, although my father died bravely alongside King Baylor."

"Your father was a military man?" Lord Movell smiles. "I am sorry for your loss, but I hope you are proud. To fight for your king and country is a great honor. His death will never be forgotten by those that were saved due to his sacrifice."

Lord Movell certainly has a way with words. He gives no indication that he's trying to interrogate me. A part of me thinks I'm paranoid while another believes it's better to be paranoid than gullible. So I offer up a smile of my own, acting the part of the respectful butler, which I technically am, but in this scenario I much rather be on Lord Movell's side. His presence is cold and uncomfortable.

"Thank you, My Lord. I couldn't be more proud of him."

I'm wondering how to get out of here. I could simply state that I have other work to attend to, or I must return to my quarters. It is getting late, but as a butler to Lord Movell while he is here, it's kind of ridiculous to claim I have other duties. I'm really starting to wish someone would switch places with me. Maybe I should start being bad at my job? It seems there are no rewards by being any good!

"Your mother then, is she with you here in Vashna?" Lord Movell asks. "It must be tough to separate after such horrendous circumstances."

"No, she passed away nearly a year ago. A cousin of mine sent out recommendation letters and I managed to get a job here, although I admit I was a bit hesitant at first."

Lord Movell seems pleased to hear it.

Yes, ok, my acting is good. Play into the hating Lord Makai game. I'll fit in fine and, hopefully, get the hell out of here.

"But the pay is good. I have shelter, food, and clean clothes, which is more than what I had back home for some time. Sometimes it is unsettling here, but I make do," I tack on, continuing to smile even if I hate it.

"Is that so?" Lord Movell places his elbow atop the arm of his chair. He rests his head in his hand. "Then what would you say if I had an offer for you, Wallace, one that could help you with your struggles and relieve you of this position in only a few years time."

I'm confused, even more so at the charming smile Lord Movell continues to wear. Although he looks friendly, there's something about his demeanor that screams to run.

"What do you mean?" I ask, worried to hear the answer.

"As a worker here you have access to Lord Makai."

Is he...?

"Keep tabs on Lord Makai, who he speaks to, where he goes, any possible business dealings and whatever else I may request at any given time. Trust me when I say, you will be paid handsomely for your labor."

He wants me to spy?!

"I...I uh..." I really don't know how to respond, because if I answer as I wish I may be killed on the spot. There's no way in hell I'm going to spy. I'm

shocked Lord Movell brings it up so easily, but that makes me believe that, perhaps, there are others? Is he confident because there are already spies here and, regardless of my response, he will get the information he desires?

"Why me?" I end up asking, even more uncertain how to get out of this mess.

"Because you are a good worker, otherwise you would not be given the duty of attending to me. I trust that also means you are at Lord Makai's side more often than others." Lord Movell drops his hand and leans back. "I see that you are uncertain. Perhaps this will persuade you."

He proceeds to hold up his hands, fingers spread as he says, "Five years. In five years, you will be able to pay off all your debts and we'll guarantee you a proper job elsewhere with enough pay to retire in ten to fifteen years. What do you say?"

Five years.

Most servants don't last more than five years here.

Holy shit. There really are others.

Honestly, I'm thinking I should bring up that I can neither read or write. Based on the situation though, I think he'll simply state that I can tell someone in person then. However, there is no way I am going to spy. I don't care what they offer, especially upon realizing the truth.

There are other spies here. Those that do not last are likely the ones that took the offer. I don't know what they could have given or what information Lord Movell wants. Nothing about the world these nobles live in makes sense to me. But my loyalty cannot be bought, even if that means Lord Movell may attempt to harm me, but I trust that Lord Makai won't allow it.

"I'm sorry, but I must refuse your offer," I answer as confidently as I can muster. I attempt to bullshit my way out. "I've been here long enough to know what happens to those that trespass Lord Makai. Risking my life for five years is not worth any money you offer and while, yes, I am unsettled

here, it certainly isn't to the extent where this is a deal I feel benefits me. I hope you understand."

Thankfully, Lord Movell doesn't appear angry. Then again, he doesn't look pleased either, even if he's smiling. He is relaxed in his chair, tossing one leg over the other while folding his hands in his lap with a sad sigh.

"I admit, I'm sorry to hear it, but I see where you're coming from. You're a smart lad, Wallace, and I thank you for listening to my offer either way."

"Then, I will no longer waste your time, My Lord." I stand and give a bow. My hands are shaking. I twist them together before me so tight they hurt.

"Have a good evening then, Wallace."

I take my leave, but I can't stop looking over my shoulder. He didn't even ask I keep this a secret. There's no implication that he cares if I talk. Somehow that is more frightening than the offer given.

Although Lord Movell's door is shut, it feels as if he is watching me. I try to keep calm, remind myself to breathe and move naturally. Regardless of my other duties, I head straight for my room, not allowing myself to break until I'm safe.

The door is shut. I press my back to it and slide to the floor, breathing so heavy I almost feel as if there's no breath at all.

"Holy shit," I gasp, tossing my hands into my hair. "Holy shit, I can't...holy shit."

I can't believe that just happened!

While it has always been clear the royals distrust Lord Makai, to think they would be so open to ask a worker they barely know to spy. Then again, perhaps he knows more than I think? Does he possibly know the truth about how Lord Makai and I originally met? I don't know, and that frightens me.

I have to tell Lord Makai as soon as possible. He'll know what to do.

✝✝✝

Since Christmas is almost here, I've decided to give three updates this week! You'll get the usual Wednesday and Saturday updates as well so Happy Holidays! :) But oh hot diggity damn, Lord Movell came right out and asked Wallie to spy! Are you shocked or even concerned like Wallie? Does Lord Movell possibly know the truth? What do you think Soran will do/say when Wallie tells him? Moving right along here, I hope you guys are enjoying! :)

Reminder, you can find more chapters on my patreon :) It's quite far ahead!
https://www.patreon.com/Twoony

✝Twenty-Three✝

Third Person P.O.V

The Unborn are unsightly creatures, skeletal in nature with leathery skin, rusted in color. Their eyes have long since faded to gray then went nearly white after death. Their long limbs are gnarled like old tree branches with talons rather than nails and sharpened teeth that could tear through flesh with ease. They are hideous to behold, although Soran certainly has no issue cutting into their corpses with a scalpel to inspect the black blood and organs that all hold a purple tint that vilis is known for.

"Smells awful in here," says Silva, bringing with her yet another crate, blessed and chained shut for safe keeping.

She sets it aside, double checking the doors shut behind her while covering her face with her arm. The stench reminds her of a dead animal left to rot in the hot sun. Looking at the two open corpses spread out on stone slabs, organs being removed and placed in enchanted jars or bowls, they may as well have been that.

"Keep a distance," Reiner warns, standing aside with his back pressed to the wall. He, like Silva, is wearing a golden charm around his neck, glowing with a soft white light that keeps the darkness of the room at bay.

"No need to tell me twice."

Silva joins him, watching Soran work without care, even when a purple mist has formed around The Unborn. It's an after effect of vilis, what is left behind from the magic that will taint, or kill, that which cannot defend itself. Soran is not bothered by it while Reiner and Silva are on edge even with the charms that keep it at bay. If the mist so much as creeps towards them, it stops short about a foot out, forming a smoke ring around them.

Soran's enchanting room is closed off from the staff and unseen. Past the bedrooms, at the very end of the west side, second floor hallway is a

supposed dead end. In reality, there's a secret only magic can find. Press against the wall in the right spot with the right words and it will open to reveal a spiral staircase leading far deeper than the basement. A long and wide room waits behind dark double doors, chained and marked with enchantments and talismans that, as soon as it is opened, leaves a bad taste in the mouth and a chill in the air.

Most magic users have an enchanting room of their own, a place to enhance a weapon, fortify a shield or create potions of healing and illusions. In Soran's case, it's more to do with research, after all, he is the one that can most easily research vilis without hindrance. It has no affect on him like it does mortals so it isn't uncommon for such situations to arise, for the king to send word for Soran to investigate an old artifact or a corpse. The enchanting room was built for such occasions and so it is littered with medical equipment from scalpels and jars to items of magic and enchantments. All given by the Baylor's, of course, since none wanted Soran to get his hands on anything they would deem a threat.

Soran works like Silva and Reiner aren't even there. He cares not for getting the blood on him nor does he have an issue with the smell that has both Silva and Reiner's eyes watering. He never asks if they are alright when he starts to sever limbs or cut open organs. Both have seen such sights before so they wait patiently for any news.

They do, however, stiffen when Soran brings out a few binding stones. They appear as nothing more than translucent rocks, but they are actually capable of holding energy and magic. Normally such stones are used to help soldiers and priests learn to wield magic, practice maintaining and focusing their powers or even carrying in case they need to replenish but haven't the time to rest.

"I hate this part," hisses Silva, choosing to look away rather than watch. Reiner does the same only after Soran holds out his hands over The Unborn and calls to Tethros in broken words that sound cracked and harsh.

The mist retreats, twisting around Soran's form as his eyes glow in the dark that consumes all until only the red of his eyes are visible along with the twisting black and purple storm at his fingertips. Vilis continues to rise from

the corpses, growing and growing in Soran's grasp until it takes him entirely, but neither Silva nor Reiner attempt to move. Then, more than ever, they are most in danger so they only wait until Soran's voice quiets and the darkness is chased away. Bit by bit, Soran forces the energy into each stone until they are as bright as stars on the stone slabs.

The Unborn don't last. Their corpses turn to ash on the table, only a few of their organs remain, the ones that Soran already stashed in enchanted jars to keep them as such. He removes the stones, taking them to a wooden table in the corner with glyphs of peculiar shapes and patterns burned into the surface. Soran sits a few stones in those patterns, whispering soft spells, his fingers dancing over top the stones that light up with different colors. Sparks flash from his fingertips, casting light in the shadows of the room.

While remaining focused on the task at hand, Soran asks, "Did the Knights of Aena have an unusual struggle with taking down The Unborn?"

"No more than usual," Silva answers. "Why?"

Soran holds up one of the stones. It levitates in the air, keeping the same distance from Reiner and Silva as the mist had done earlier. Reiner notices the anomaly immediately while Silva only raises a brow.

"Are all the stones like this?" asks Reiner. His tone is troubled and expression set into one of concern.

Soran nods.

"What's wrong with the stone?" Silva inquires. Unlike Soran and Reiner, Silva is trained to fight, not inspect. She's the one that battles and brings what is left for those such as Reiner and Soran to investigate.

"Vilis, we always describe it as tainted but this is..."

"Pure?" Soran interjects, earning a raised brow from Silva and a scowl from Reiner.

"Pure is not the way I would describe it," argues Reiner with a firm shake of his head while Soran rolls his eyes.

"Even lumen has some semblance of vilis and vice versa." Soran finally faces them. Silva turns her nose up in disgust and Reiner shuffles in place. "With light comes darkness and with darkness comes light, it is the natural way of things, even I have lumen coursing through my veins, very little but some. This, however, is pure."

The stone returns to Soran's grasp, flashing a brilliant violet that makes Silva's stomach churn. Even Reiner tries to press closer to the wall, pure discomfort rattles their bones while Soran doesn't even flinch. Vilis has that sort of affect on the creatures of Aena. Even the most powerful of knights and priests feel the need to run, they've simply been trained to stand firm.

"There's no light at all." Soran sets the stone aside on the table. "They would have eventually died." He gestures to the jars that litter the stone tables. "Such power likely cannot even be contained within the stones for long."

One stone had already cracked.

"They were being torn apart from within. There is no way they were unaware-"

"What of my soldiers then?" Silva quickly interrupts, eyes widening with worry. "They fought them. If this vilis is different then are they at risk?"

Reiner shakes his head. "If they were, I would have already known."

"I would argue they'd already be dead," Soran tacks on, leaning against the table with his arms crossed. "However, since I know His Majesty will ask it of me in the future, from this point on have all Unborn corpses brought to me. We can hope this to be an outlier but I highly doubt it."

Both Reiner and Silva nod in agreement. Odd for the three to agree, but in this case it's understandable. Even Soran doesn't want The Unborn to do as they please. They would bring about destruction to all. Soran may not like

humans, but he certainly didn't want them, and the rest of the world, exterminated nor did he want to risk more vampires descending upon their world. Three was already too many.

"How do you suppose this happened then?" Silva asks. "And what could they be up to?"

Reiner scowls when he speaks, "The Unborn are known for their greed. One can easily surmise they wish to control vilis, which is a ridiculous desire, but there has to be more to it than that."

"Is it possible they wish to bring another vampire?"

Soran bites the inside of his cheek when he answers, "That is certainly a possibility, or even attempting to bring anything from the other side."

"The other side?" Silva snorts. "I didn't take you for one to believe in an afterlife."

"Tethros and Aena must come from somewhere, the other side, the afterlife, another realm, whatever one wishes to call it. The fact remains that where they are, untouched magical resources likely reside. The Unborn could be after that, or hoping their God will grace us with his presence."

"Karsissia may have something to do with this as well." Reiner groans and presses two fingers against his pounding temple. He is already dreading the paperwork and orders to come. "Even if she is not one to meddle, this is too much of a coincidence, her acting up and this new discovery."

"Even if she isn't involved, I wouldn't be surprised if she'd show interest in the future. A possible new vilis, more power, she'll come for it."

"Then we best make sure word doesn't get out." Silva gestures to what more remains to be inspected. "The sooner we get the answers the better."

"Everything discovered while here will be taken and researched further at The Academy. Please keep track of your findings." Reiner narrows his gaze on Soran, knowing even if the vampire is helping, he won't make it easy.

Soran says nothing as he returns to his research, a research that lasts days.

✝✝✝

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays! Here's your gift? XD I hope you're all enjoying your holidays, eat lots of good food and stay warm :) So, ooooooooh, something is going on with The Unborn. What do you think they're up to? Will Soran find any answers? Do you think Karsissia is involved or will get involved? Hope you're enjoying the story so far ^^ thanks for reading!

✝Twenty-Four✝

Wallie P.O.V.

With guests here, Lord Makai is impossible to speak with. I must inform him in private, but he is rarely seen or alone.

Most of the days I am unaware of where he is. It's as if he, Lord Movell, and Lady Connte have simply disappeared. And when he is in his office, he is always accompanied by them while their escorts have full access to the estate. At times they're in the library or walking through the gardens, and others they're sitting in the lounge or munching on snacks.

From an outsider's perspective, they are mere guests, but after speaking with Lord Movell, I think they're searching for something. Why else would there be spies on the estate? Tack on the stealing from Makai Mining Co., it's becoming even more clear how desperate the royals are to get something, anything, on Lord Makai to reduce his power. While he is physically unbeatable, his monetary value is also astronomical. As Hael said, he probably has money for his own militia if he chose to go that route. The Baylor's must be unsettled, or maybe I am thinking far too much into this.

I don't know. I really don't know, and honestly? I shouldn't care. There is nothing I can do. Lord Makai can take care of himself. Hell, there's no one that can care for him better. So what can I, a mere butler that doesn't even have a basic education, do to assist him in any way?

And, besides, why do I want to?! I don't gain anything from it. I'm being ridiculous. I need to stop thinking about this, although I still plan to tell Lord Makai what happened. I will never spy on him, not in a million years.

The days continue to go by with our not so welcome guests. Gossip escalates the longer they stay. Rumors that I know started in the kitchens (because I was there to hear it) spread throughout the estate. Now everyone

is discussing The Red Lady or even the chance of another war, most likely with Emperor Ocktevian of Leschandeal. Apparently he's moving south towards Aberia, but who knows the truth in this place.

Of course, all the rumors don't help settle my nerves. Since I am still attending to Lord Movell, I see him more often than others. He never mentions his past offer or how I declined it, simply smiles or asks how I'm doing. Like that, he comes across as a kind priest, but I can't trust him. Not after what happened.

On the third day, even more weird happenings occur.

I'm walking past the library with an arms full of clean sheets for the bedrooms when a few loud thuds catch my attention. I stop to stare at the door that is slightly ajar, enough for me to hear the hushed voices within.

"Hey, watch it. Don't make a mess in here," a man hisses. I think it's one of the priests that came with Lord Movell.

"Calm down, I just dropped a few books. Put them back," another says. I step closer to the doors, standing aside while trying to peer in.

I was right, it's the priests.

The two men are standing on the left side of the room. Some books lay on the floor that the lanky one picks up. He returns them while the other is continuing down the line. He's acting odd, pulling out each book then flipping through the pages, even inspecting the empty space before replacing them.

"We've looked through here already," Lanky says with a heavy sigh. "So have others. There's nothing here."

"Our job is to look so we will look even if it's in the same place. With this blood sucker, you'll never know what, or how he's hiding something," the other responds with an annoyed huff. He tousles his hair with obvious frustration.

"It'd be nice if we even knew what we were looking for," Lanky grumbles, earning a sharp glare from his counterpart.

I crinkle my nose in confusion.

They don't even know what they're looking for? What the hell is up with these obsessive freaks? Desperate may not begin to even describe what they are.

"Vilis cannot be mistaken, we will know it when we see it," the second argues.

I suppose that's true. With Lord Makai's abilities, he could hide something for sure. What is that something? I haven't the foggiest, and apparently neither do they.

"And what if it is not an item of vilis he is hiding?" Lanky questions.

"What are you implying?"

Their voices become more hushed. I press closer to the door, biting my lip when it makes the faintest of squeaks.

"Is someone there?" I barely hear one asks.

My eyes widen. I back away immediately.

There's nothing I can do about these two, especially now when they may have grown suspicious. I rather not risk them informing Lord Movell that they caught me listening or even spoke with them. I've heard enough to inform Lord Makai of their suspicious activities so I swiftly leave before I'm caught.

Glancing over my shoulder, I find no one following me. That's relieving, but their whispers were not.

What are they looking for? Is that the true meaning of their visit? One of them mentioned an item of vilis, but would that be odd to find here? Lord

Makai is, after all, a vampire that came of dark magic. Suppose it is illegal either way, his very existence is illegal by our own laws.

I'm running in circles though. I'll have to speak with Lord Makai about this matter.

I attempt to focus on work but, as I am changing the sheets, it suddenly dawned on me...

Aren't I already a spy? Not for Lord Movell, but for Lord Makai, because all that I've seen or heard will be reported to him the moment I see him. He's not even paying me for it! Wow, maybe I should have taken the deal, at least then my work will be appreciated.

On the fifth day, our guests finally leave.

Much like when they arrived, the servants line the entryway to bow. Lord Makai is less than hospitable with his so called goodbye.

"Should you visit without a proper request again, I will deny you entrance," Lord Makai says without any remorse. "And try your best to handle your own dilemmas. I rather not see you again."

"The feeling is mutual," Lady Connte snarls, turning away without another word. She and her escorts are already out the door, but Lord Movell remains.

"Always the charmer," he says with a chuckle. "We may not visit again soon, but I do hope you remember The Day of Aberia grows near. His Royal Majesty expects your presence at the palace to celebrate the birth of our great kingdom."

"If that is what His Majesty wishes then he best send a royal invitation properly, otherwise, I will not attend."

"I will be sure to remind him," Lord Movell responds, this time he actually sounds a bit annoyed.

Then he and his escorts finally leave.

Once the doors are shut, we all stand tall. Before any of us can even blink, Lord Makai shouts for Higra. A few of us, including myself, jump at the sudden call. Higra, however, doesn't hesitate to ascend the stairs. Lord Makai gives an order then stomps away, appearing far moodier than usual.

"Get back to work everyone. Those of you that were attending to our guests, clean the rooms thoroughly and burn all the linens," Higra orders, clapping her hands afterwards is if to tell us to hop to it.

"Burn the linens?" I ask Hael after running up behind him. He actually had one of the rooms for the escorts so he's on cleaning duty too.

"Yeah, think it has to do with the smell."

"The smell?"

"You know Lord Makai's sense of smell is far superior than our own. Their scents are probably everywhere and, well, he clearly doesn't like them," Hael answers with a shrug, proving he's not nearly as interested as I am, although he came up with great reasoning. However...

"Say someone farts—"

Hael snorts with laughter.

"That must be awful for him," I laugh.

Hael slaps my back joyously, shaking his head as he walks away to get to work. I can still hear him laughing even when I make it to Lord Movell's room.

I get to work as soon as I arrive. The sooner I finish, the sooner I can speak with Lord Makai. However, my work comes to a halt when I notice a single folded paper on the bedside table. A glass paperweight in the shape of a dagger sits atop it, glistening a bright blue. I pick up the paper, biting my lip upon reading, "Wallace," on the front. Not just because it's addressed to me, but also because I can't fucking read!

Not all of it at least.

There's an address for sure, one that clearly belongs to The Academy because those are two words I recognize. I can take a guess of what it says though, likely a request to get in contact should I change my mind. Great, now I have to hide this so I can learn to read it later, hopefully it's not a veiled threat!

Oh wait, I'll give it to Lord Makai as well! He can read it and at least tell me if it's a threat or not.

I shove the paper in my pocket then return to cleaning.

✝✝✝

Poor Reiner, leaving a note that Wallie can't read xD But oh, what do you think the priests were looking for? And they mentioned others sneaking around so what could they be so interested in that they have yet to find? How will Soran act when Wallie tells him what happened with Reiner?

✝Twenty-Five✝

By the time I finish it's after lunch. There's no chance to ask Layne to allow me to take up Lord Makai's meal instead. Perhaps I should just knock and request to speak with him? Although, based on his mood, he may refuse or agree and grow even angrier. Who knows how far he'll chuck me out of the room the moment I anger him.

In the end, I don't manage to speak with Lord Makai until the following day. I get up extra early, rush downstairs to meet Layne, who stares at me with wide eyes when I ask, "Would you allow me to take up Lord Makai's morning tea today?"

"Uh...I suppose I don't see why not," Layne answers, although he's giving me this look that states he is baffled I would offer myself to do it. He actually ends up asking, "Why do you want to?"

"Well, I do hope to be allowed to serve His Grace on another business trip. Not that I'm trying to take your position or anything," I quickly explain.

Layne smiles. Seems he didn't think that way to begin with. Shrugging, he gestures to the kettle that's already whistling atop the stove.

"Go ahead, Wallie. This gives me more time to work on my other duties anyways."

Good. I've managed to at least go up there, although speaking with him right after waking isn't a good idea either. Whatever, I will wait until after he has his tea.

Once the tea is prepared, I head to Lord Makai's room. Knocking on the door, I announce my presence and do not enter until Lord Makai's well known snarl informs me that he is unhappily coherent.

The room is dark. The only light comes from the slightly open doorway. I attempt to stay within that light as to not trip and make a mess. Then I'm at

Lord Makai's bedside, setting the tea aside and pouring a cup to hand to him. Just as I remember, he's still half asleep, resting with his back to the headboard, hair a complete mess when he takes the cup to only then realize it is not Layne in the room.

"Wallace?" Lord Makai asks.

I wonder if he knows his hand is encasing mine around the cup. My hand is heating up, which makes no sense because his hands are freezing. They're long and slender, soft and chilling yet comforting in the most anxious of ways.

"Good morning, Your Grace. Layne is attending to other duties so I've brought your morning tea. I hope it's to your liking," I say so cheerfully that it's obvious I'm teasing, which earns a snort in response.

Finally, he takes the cup. My hands remain unbelievably warm. I still feel his touch.

I walk over to the windows while announcing, "I will open the curtains now."

Light filters into the room that is as bare as ever. Admittedly, I had hoped Lord Makai would add something to his sad excuse of a room, but it's probably been like this for a thousand years. I doubt it'll change anytime soon.

"Why are you here?" Lord Makai asks, watching from over the rim of his tea cup. "Layne's duties today are with me. I doubt he would have asked for your assistance as he has always been able to handle himself on his own."

"Perhaps he was just tired today?"

My lie is seen through easily. Lord Makai holds out his empty cup for another, which I refill immediately. But he's not drinking it, he's watching me. I was such a great liar to Lord Movell though! Why am I failing miserably here? But it's not as if I'm lying because I do not wish to tell, I simply want to wait.

"I rather tell once you're in a better mood, Your Grace."

"A better mood?"

"You're rather cranky in the mornings, tack on your unwelcome guests earlier and I can easily guess you're crankier than usual."

"Are you aware that staff go through an evaluation every year to determine whether they should get a raise? I see you won't even need an evaluation. I'll make sure you don't get a raise for the next ten years."

"Ten years?!" I gape at the bastard before me. "I'll...I'll just go work somewhere else!"

"You'd try."

Before I can fight back, Lord Makai sets his glass aside in order to say, "Tell me why you're here, Wallace."

Ah, right, I did come with a purpose. I suppose he has had some of his morning tea. Now he's even getting out of bed, stretching his long limbs so that every muscle in his back is so visible that I swear he's carved from stone. There's no way someone actually looks like that. It's simply unfair.

He steps over to a pair of double doors in the seating area. When they swing open, a walk in closet is revealed that's likely as big as my own room. There are countless clothes with a table at the center scattered with fine accessories. The sad thing is, I know this is only part of his wardrobe. There are other rooms that have more.

Freaking rich people.

"I, uh...well, where do I begin?" I hum.

"At the beginning would be best."

I groan, but walk to the doorway, peeking into the hall once to make sure it's clear before shutting the door completely. There is no way I am joining

Lord Makai in his dressing room. I hear him changing so I stand outside the closet doors.

"Lord Movell, he offered me money to spy on you."

Lord Makai doesn't respond. Is he angry with me?

I bite my lip when I go on to say, "He asked that I keep tabs on you, your business dealings, who you meet with, where you go, and whatever else he would ask for."

Lord Makai steps out. I expect him to be fully dressed, but he's not. His pants are a deep blue while his white undershirt is unbuttoned and hanging on his shoulders. Brushing back his hair, Lord Makai leans against the open closet doorway while my eyes can't seem to decide where to look.

He's really fit. Damn it, why? Does he even work out? Is this another unfair vampire thing? How ridiculous, just...hey, put a shirt on!

When Lord Makai finally speaks, I am shocked by his question, "Why are you telling me?"

"Because someone asked me to spy on you."

"A spy should not reveal themselves to whom they are spying on."

"What?" I ask, now knowing exactly where to look. I face Lord Makai, look directly into the cold red of his eyes and...see nothing. I don't see anything. I'm unsure if I'm hurt or angry, maybe both.

"You...you think I accepted?"

"Why wouldn't you?" Lord Makai asks without hesitation or remorse. Even his voice holds a cold distance that chills me to the core.

"Because it's wrong. I would never."

"Why not? It's good money. What do you have to lose?"

He's joking. He's fucking joking, right? Is this some kind of test? Because it isn't funny. It's wrong, but he's staring at me like he honestly doesn't get why I would say no...like he thinks I'm lying, trying to stab him in the back like everyone else.

I shake my head, stepping away in disbelief and anger.

"Are you joking with me?" I ask, but the answer is already there; clearly written across Lord Makai's apathetic expression.

The room is suddenly cold, or maybe that's me. My stomach twists into a knot when I growl, "You claim humans think little of you, but you clearly think little of us too."

Lord Makai has nothing to say, rather, I don't give him time to speak.

"May I be excused, Your Grace? I will inform Layne to return to his duties at your side because, in all honesty, I would rather not see you."

Regardless of Lord Makai's answer, I turn for the door. He doesn't try to stop me so I take that as him giving permission. After opening the door, I throw a final look back, finding Lord Makai standing quietly. When our eyes meet, I'm confident enough to say mine are far colder.

"Oh, I also overheard Lord Movell's escorts searching through your library," I hiss between my teeth, watching Lord Makai scowl, but I'm uncertain if it's towards me or the news. "They mentioned vilis and admitted to snooping before, others apparently have done so as well, but I guess the words of a spy mean nothing to you, do they?"

Lord Makai looks away still saying nothing.

I slam the door after my exit, uncaring if his rude ass is bothered by it or not.

Fuck him and fuck myself for being stupid enough to think he'd care to hear what I had to say. I can't believe he thinks I would agree to spy. He thinks of me as dirt, doesn't he? Maybe even lesser than that! Nothing more than

some dumb kid that he could kill as easily as everyone else because he's a heartless son of a bitch!

Stupid. I was stupid to even bother. I should have known better, but I guess now I do. Like I was thinking before, there is nothing to be done and I shouldn't give a shit if anything is done. My job is to keep the estate running, to clean, cook, and take care of the estate so that is what I will do. I'll get experience, learn to read and write, then find myself another job where the boss isn't a literal blood sucker.

Being angry and cussing out that bastard in my mind is easy, but trying to tell my heart to be as angry as my mind, that's not easy at all.

It hurts. And I hate that it hurts.

✝✝✝

HAPPY NEW YEAR! But *sigh* Soran, why you gotta hurt our boy like that? =/ Are you surprised by Soran's reaction? Are you surprised with Wallie's? What happens now that Wallie is mega pissed at our moody vampire overlord? lol

✝Twenty-Six✝

"You ok, Wallie?" Hael asks, watching me scrub the ballroom floor with a ferocity I didn't even know I had.

"Fine, why do you ask?" I lie, but send the boy a beaming smile.

He has taken a break in the scrubbing, sitting on his knees with a bucket of soapy water beside him. Sighing, he sets his rag aside and says, "You've been acting strange for a while."

"Strange?"

I think the word he meant is agitated, since that is exactly how I've been and I know it.

Almost a week has passed since the incident with Lord Makai. We haven't spoken, although once Layne asked if I would take up Lord Makai's lunch. I declined. I doubt Lord Makai wishes to see me nor I him so I had to apologize to Layne.

I've been working like crazy. Work is the only way to keep me from ranting violently or imagining kicking Lord Makai into an active volcano. I wonder if anyone has tried that, he shouldn't be able to heal if there is nothing left to heal! Freaking no good son of a—see, there I go again. I need to work harder.

"Look at you, you're scrubbing like someone is threatening your life," Hael says, pointing accusingly.

"I'm working. This is my job and I want to do well."

"Well? You're exceeding so much that it's making the rest of us look bad."

I smirk at Hael's teasing smile. Shaking his head, he gets back to work, scrubbing his own section that has taken him probably three times as long

to do. Not that I'm complaining, I want more work.

"Why don't we go to South End tomorrow?" Hael asks. "We can get you some new books, maybe get a drink. It'll help take your edge off."

"I don't have an edge, but...I haven't had a drink in a while so, yeah, we can go. If I get drunk after one drink though, it is your duty to drag my ass back."

Hael laughs. "I'm not making any promises."

Then we both get back to work with the usual banter shared throughout the day. I must be more obvious than I thought though because even Elamir and Janein ask if I'm feeling alright. I promise both that I am as fine as ever because I know, in time, I will be. I'm just bothered right now because of the betrayal, which I have finally accepted as the reason to why I am so upset.

It was a betrayal. I thought Lord Makai and I were on much friendlier terms. I wouldn't say friends exactly, but there was an understanding that I was on his side. I don't hate him, especially for something he has no control over. Even now, I don't hate Lord Makai for being a vampire. I'm pissed at him for being an asshole. He assumes I would spy, because of what? Others have and I must be exactly like them? Somehow our time spent together, and our past, mean nothing? I get why, seriously, I understand, but that doesn't mean I'm any less pissed off.

Betrayal. That's exactly what it was and he doesn't even care enough to apologize. I've learned my lesson. In time, I'll move on.

But maybe that will take longer than I expect because, around lunch, Higra calls for me. I stand before her, confused, anxious, and frustrated when she says, "You will be joining Lord Makai on a trip into town today."

"What?" I ask, trying desperately to hide my scowl. Higra will certainly lecture me for it. "What for, and why not Layne?"

"I'm unsure. Lord Makai simply requested a carriage to be readied and for you to attend him. Get yourself ready and wait at the door."

"But I have other duties to attend to!" I exclaim, flinching at the icy glare Higra sends me. Honestly, hers is more terrifying than Lord Makai's.

"Do as you're told, Wallace."

"Please, Higra, tell Lord Makai I have—"

"No."

"But I don't—"

"Whatever reason you have, I do not care. You either do as you're told or pack your bags."

Higra doesn't argue further. She turns and walks away with an annoyed huff.

Honestly, I'm tempted to pack my bags.

When I go downstairs to grab my coat, I actually toss my suitcase on the bed and shove clothes inside. But reality sets in. I have nowhere else to go. Although I have money saved up, I'm still paying off Mom's debts and I can't afford living in town. I don't have the required skills to work at most of the places. Once I'm literate, perhaps I can make due, but now...

Now I throw on my coat and wait at the front doors for Lord Makai.

He appears moments after I do. I bow my head, keeping my gaze to the floor when I open the door for him. He steps out into light snow flurries falling from a gray sky. The deep green of his suit stands out against the white serenity around us.

The carriage is waiting. Lord Makai steps in. I attempt to close the door, but like our first ride, he says, "Get in."

"I'm grateful for your concern, but the butler should sit up front, Your Grace."

"Get. In."

I sigh.

The door shuts behind me.

Lord Makai is sitting by the window on the opposite side. Good, there's at least a little distance between us. He's not looking at me, and I turn away once I know that he isn't. The carriage lurches forward. Only the sound of the carriage and horses echo in this cold chamber.

What the hell is he doing? Is this some sort of game now? Ask me to come along to, what, make sure I'm not a spy? Maybe he's sicker than I thought and he's enjoying this, enjoying making me uncomfortable and frustrated and—

"How are your studies coming along?" Lord Makai asks, dare I say it, nervously.

I almost look at him, but keep myself from doing so when I reply, "My studies are coming along quite well. I am flattered you would ask, Your Grace."

That ends that. If Lord Makai was attempting to make conversation, he failed, rather I made sure he did. I'm not in the mood to play this game. I will not enjoy myself so neither will he.

We're silent throughout the rest of the ride, save for the constant tapping of Lord Makai's fingers against his knees.

When the carriage comes to a stop, I open the door to find ourselves parked outside a tailor shop in town. In the windows are pristine suits embellished with the finest gems and silk. From extravagant to simple but sophisticated attire is perched on white mannequins standing or sitting elegantly in the clear as crystal windows. The sign above is large enough to see from down

the street with flourished gold letters embedded into a silver plaque. The doorknobs are seemingly made of diamonds, actually, seemingly may be a lie. Based on the shop, they're probably real.

I'm unsure why we're here, but I open the door for Lord Makai. We enter the store that has a faint smell of cologne. There are full shelves and racks with folded attire throughout the shop with lush seating areas and even snacks. But a tall man with gray whiskers leads us up navy carpeted stairs to the second floor where, somehow, the suits are even more luxurious. These are made for royals, a place for a man like Lord Makai or the king himself.

The curtains for the dressing rooms are long and heavy with floral designs stitched into the fabric. Silver tassels hang off curtains, chairs and lamps, so that the light itself comes across brighter. The room is bright, clean as a whistle with shelves full of jewels embedded into watches, belt buckles and more.

"We are honored to have you here yet again, Your Grace. We have such wonderful new attire released just this year by the finest designers in all of Aberia," says Whiskers with a courteous bow.

"I care not who made it, only that it serves its purpose. Bring them out," Lord Makai orders with a wave of his hand, taking a seat in one of the velvet armchairs.

Whiskers eyes me suspiciously for the briefest of moments then smiles and walks away. We're left in silence, me standing aside with my head down. Lord Makai is tapping his fingers again, this time on the arms of the chair. He's staring at me, I can feel it, but I refuse to look.

"Raise your gaze," Lord Makai orders.

I do, but I don't look his way. He groans.

"Look at me."

I can't call that an order. It didn't sound like one, so I take my chances and don't comply.

"Do you need anything, Your Grace? Shall I fetch you a snack?" I step towards the table that's directly in front of him. There are small sandwiches and desserts, but before I can attempt to grab one, a hand wraps around my wrist, pulling me to Lord Makai who is now standing. His troubled scowl is in view.

His touch is warm. I hate so much that it's warm. It doesn't make sense that it is, yet it always is. How and why and when will it stop, but most importantly, do I really want it to?

✝✝✝

Wallie is quite angry Soran, what do you plan to do? ;D But he has managed to, uh, force Wallie to spend time with him lol Tis the perk of being his employer, I suppose, or the disadvantage xD What does Soran have to say, if anything?

✝Twenty-Seven✝

Lord Makai is right in front of me, hand around my wrist and looming. Every breath is felt against my cheeks. I worry he may feel my pulse against his fingertips, the ones that are softly spreading along my wrist that's searing from his touch. My gaze is turned. I'm fixated on a suit across the room, burgundy in color with a black, ruffled undershirt. I try to count the buttons or the holes in the lace ribbons in hopes to ignore the sensation of Lord Makai's hand or the close proximity.

So unbelievably close, too close for comfort (although my heart would argue otherwise.)

Then he lets go. No words or warning, simply lets go. I think I'm grateful, I don't know.

"I hope these are to your likings, Your Grace," says Whiskers.

Lord Makai must have heard him coming.

I step away to find Whiskers and a woman with pink hair at his side. She has a blue suit in her grasp while Whiskers has a black one with red buttons lining the pointed edges. As he speaks, and his arms move, the light hits the jacket so it reveals the delicate but simple design that glistens in the light. The vest beneath is also black with the same design only in red. Certainly fitting for Lord Makai, a sophisticated elegance, but the blue one I can confidently say isn't his style. Although it's simple, the color is bright and eye catching. The vest beneath is an off-white, accompanied by a white shirt with a ruffled collar and blue gem attached.

I admit, I'd laugh if he put that on.

"Wallace."

I jump at the call of my name, realizing I missed everything Whiskers was saying about the suits.

"Try on your suit."

"What?" I ask, peering at Lord Makai, who is already standing by the dressing room with his own suit in hand. I've completely forgotten my rule of "not looking at him," because now I can't look away.

"M-My suit?" I sputter then catch the blue out of the corner of my eye.

Pink girl is by me, arms outstretched to hand over said suit. I dare not even touch it. Just looking at it, I know it's expensive.

"Why am I in need of a suit, Your Grace?" I ask, still admiring the clothes that...yeah, I'd like to own. The suit may not be Lord Makai's style, but I sure as hell feel like it could be mine. I imagine I would feel incredible. It is impeccably made and something I never dreamed of seeing this close, let alone wearing.

"Because you will be attending The Day of Aberia with me at the castle," Lord Makai replies. "Now, try on your suit."

He says nothing more before stepping into the dressing room.

What the hell? There's a lot more to discuss! Like the fact that I don't want to go, and I shouldn't. Why does he need me? Is it normal to take a butler? And if it is, Layne is better versed in that world. Most of all, I don't want to spend more time with Lord Makai or even see any of the nobles.

But now Whiskers is smiling at me so forcefully it's scary. He's as confused as I, but probably even more irritated.

"Have you tried a suit of this caliber on before, Sir?" He asks sweetly.

I doubt he has ever had to call a butler "Sir." The only reason he is doing so is likely because he fears what Lord Makai will do if he doesn't. He brought me, a mere butler, to a top tailor for a suit. That is not what one would expect and so I am being respected.

I am as confused as you are, Whiskers.

"Uh, no, I haven't," I answer, nervously walking to the dressing room with him right behind.

"Should you be in need of assistance, simply ask for me. I will be right outside."

"Thank you."

The curtain closes behind me.

I'm in a room with a mirror on the wall, revealing my nervous as all hell self with a suit probably more expensive than everything I've ever owned combined. I'm so scared I'll ruin it that it takes forever to change into. Even then, I'm stumped on the cufflinks and the ruffles. Whiskers has to be called in to assist me. I feel like a child, standing here as he adjusts everything and comments about how it will look even better after being fitted, should we decide on this suit. He said "we" like I have any say in the matter, which I clearly don't.

But I can't deny that, as soon as the suit is on, I'm awestruck.

There's no way that's me. The one in the mirror is a Lord, someone of importance and power with more money than he can count. The blue certainly is eye catching, yet my eyes are even brighter because of it. And it makes my legs appear even longer, shoulders broader and gives a sense of authority and intelligence that I do not possess. The suit is exquisite in every way, and I sure as hell am not worthy enough to wear it, although I am grateful to have even tried it on.

Whiskers steps out of the dressing room with me hesitantly following. If I thought I looked good in the suit, I don't know how to describe Lord Makai.

The suit is as luxurious as the person wearing it; the glistening black accentuating his pale skin and the deep red of his eyes. The rare spots of color give the suit extra personality without being obnoxious or joke worthy. And the red accessories, such as the buttons and the gem embedded into the belt buckle, sparkle like a soft flame.

I want to scowl or make a face of disgust, but I can't even deny while angry with him that he doesn't look good. The bastard is as attractive as ever, actually even more so. That shouldn't be allowed. I am calling bullshit.

"You both look most excellent, Your Grace," says Whiskers, kissing up as every shop handler does. Then he's speaking with Lord Makai about possible alterations while I'm standing here nervously, the usual now I guess. I don't even want to sit for fear of something may rip or catch and tear. I don't see why or how, but it's a fear I have regardless.

"Are there any requests you have, Sir?" Whiskers turns to me, smiling so that his eyes do the same.

"R-Requests?" I hum, still baffled by this whole situation to even consider what he means by requests.

"The pants need a trim and the jacket is too loose," Lord Makai answers when I'm clearly left in the dark.

He steps over to me. I am about to jump back, but he's already grabbing my jacket, admiring the vest beneath then lifting up my chin to inspect the shirt. If we were alone, I absolutely would swat his hand away...I think. I think I would, or I hope I would. Right now, my heart is telling me it won't let me. My hands are shaking so I clench them into a fist, which doesn't really help.

"Does the shirt bother you?" Lord Makai asks. "If you're to be wearing this to the palace, it must be comfortable."

"I, uh, I am unclear as to why I'm wearing this," I whisper, watching Whiskers over Lord Makai's shoulder. I don't think he heard me so I continue, "I would appreciate it if Layne went with you, Your Grace. He has gone before, hasn't he?"

"He has, and he will be going with us, but should a time come when he cannot then the duty will fall upon you. It's practice."

"I don't think I'll be here long enough to worry about that," I counter easily, smiling at Lord Makai until I see that he's not glaring or scowling. Although

his brow is furrowed, it's not in anger and all I can do is squirm under the silent stare.

✝✝✝

Oh snap! Wallie just said that =O Soran, you have to get better at apologizing cause this ain't working so well lol

Reminder that you can read this on my patreon. It's pretty far ahead so if you're interested in early updates, check it out ^^ https://www.patreon.com/Twoony

✝Twenty-Eight✝

Lord Makai steps away to speak with Whiskers. I'm not paying attention, choosing to keep my head down. Then Whiskers asks that I step back into the fitting room. While there, he gets all my measurements. I have to stare at the ceiling to avoid meeting Lord Makai's gaze in the mirror. Whiskers leaves afterwards, shutting the curtains so I may change.

There's one problem though, Whiskers was here earlier to help me into this damn thing and it'd be nice if he could help me out. However, when I peek out, the only person I see is Lord Makai.

"You're not changed yet," he says. He must have already changed while Whiskers was measuring me.

He steps closer and I clench the curtain.

"Where's...the shop keeper?" I ask, because I probably shouldn't call him Whiskers out loud.

He attempts to tease me again, "He's making preparations to prepare the fittings for our suits, but he'll need your suit as well in order to do that."

"I'll be out in a second."

"Do you need assistance?"

"No."

"I'm fairly certain you do."

Freaking jackass. So what? You acting smug for being able to wear these fancy suits? I'll have you know, there are more people like me that haven't a clue so, clearly, you're the weird one!

"I'll handle it," I mumble, but when I try to undo the ruffles around my neck I hear the faintest sound of a rip and fucking panic.

I fling open the curtain to glare at Lord Makai's smug expression.

"Just the cufflinks and the shirt," I hiss.

He steps into the dressing room with me. The curtain flutters shut. I don't see why they are shut. Please open them because right now I am feeling claustrophobic. I never had an issue with tight spaces before, but now that Lord Makai is here, standing so close that I fear he may hear the sudden quickening of my heart, I'm terrified. At least, I tell myself it's terror.

I stand awkwardly as he easily helps with the sleeves. Once they're loose, I slip the jacket off and raise my chin so he can remove the gem without stabbing me. I'm ordered to turn around and he loosens the ruffles. Here I was messing with the front, forgetting it was in the back, go figure.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, hearing his hum in response. "Ordering me to come along and dragging me with you to The Day of Aberia. You know, I'm going to do my best to humiliate you there."

"Nothing you can do will humiliate me. I'm hated enough as is," he responds and, damn, somehow I feel like the bad guy.

"Either way, I do not wish to go. If that means I'm to be fired, so be it."

"You make things exceedingly complicated."

"Excuse you?" I turn, crossing my arms and stepping away only to realize I can't. The wall hits my back. Lord Makai is far closer than he should be. There's enough room for another person in here yet he isn't giving me space.

The air is hot. I'm stuffy. He needs to move.

"You're still angry," he states rather than questions.

He steps closer.

Why? Why the hell is he stepping closer? My heart is ringing in my ears.

I swallow the lump in my throat to respond, "I could never be angry with you, Your Grace."

"Who called who petty again?"

"Perhaps I've picked it up from you. I think this is further proof that Layne should go with you."

Lord Makai presses his fingers to his temple. His eye twitches. I think he wants to yell, normally he already would be, but he never does. I even wait for it, expect for another chucking out of the room or a rude lecture, but none of that ever comes. Instead, he sighs heavily and asks, "Why am I doing this?"

"Why are you asking me?" I respond.

"I thought it was obvious."

"You're obviously trying to annoy me."

"I'm not. I'm—" he narrows his gaze, but it's the most forced glare I've ever seen. "This is...meant to be an apology...or the start of one?"

"Huh?" I turn my head, expecting someone to jump into the room and shout "just kidding," but that doesn't happen. And while watching Lord Makai, I actually believe he's telling the truth.

His shoulders are tense, arms crossed almost defensively and eyes still narrowed into a forced glare, probably to try and hide how solemn his eyes are. And his jaw is moving faintly from side to side, teeth grinding from nerves behind downturned lips.

Maybe I feel a little bad, but I'm not giving in that easily.

"An apology?" I huff. "Buying me an expensive suit so I feel like I owe you then forcing me to go to the palace where I'll probably humiliate myself, how is any of that an apology?"

He has no response other than the faintest flinch I've ever seen.

"Besides, there's only one proper way to apologize and you haven't made any move to do so. There are two words I want to hear." I hold up two fingers for emphasis. "And maybe good reasoning to why I should forgive you after you accused me of being someone that would—"

I don't even want to say it, worried someone may be listening. Instead, I growl and angrily ruffle my own hair. Now Lord Makai is looking at me like I'm crazy.

"Do you even know why it made me so mad?" I whisper, only feeling worse when his face goes completely blank. "Isn't that the one thing that should be obvious?"

He actually shakes his head, and I want to slap him for it.

"You remember you saved my life, twice." Again, I hold up two fingers. "So I know, I *know* who you are. Not only that, but we...I thought we were at least at an understanding that I'm on your side. Even after what I've seen, I'm on your side, Soran."

Lord Makai's eyes widen, as do mine. My jaw drops and his loosens. Then I'm waving my arms frantically in the air while his drop listlessly to his side, watching me with a soft stare that makes my toes curl.

"Soran?" He asks, grinning.

"I-I meant L-Lord Makai."

"No, you didn't." Now he holds up two fingers. "That's twice you've called me by name, unless we choose to count when you were a child."

"Wait, when was—"

Oh, I remember. The assassin. I said Soran. Holy shit, I called him by name and he didn't say anything.

"It was spur of the moment," I grumble. "I was about to die so I think you should cut me some slack."

Lord Makai nods. Guess he agrees to cut me some slack. But now we're silent, the two of us standing in a dressing room that feels much smaller than it should seeing as he's still unbelievably close. If I trusted myself to reach out and push him away then I would, but I don't because I fear I may not let go.

"I'm sorry," Lord Makai says out of the blue, successfully throwing me for a loop. I'm shocked and don't know how to react to his words or change of demeanor. He's still hesitant when he speaks, "I am not...accustomed to having anyone...on my side."

I can tell simply by the way he spoke. Lord Makai is far more alone than I think any of us realize.

"By now, I trust you've figured out that there are already spies among the estate."

So he did know? I can't imagine what that's like.

"I've never known of one to deny their offers. It was wrong of me to assume the worst of you and...and I apologize, Wallie."

I'm not sure why this is what I choose to focus on yet I end up whispering, "You called me Wallie."

"You called me Soran."

Great, now I'm smiling. I can't even lie to myself that I'm still angry because I'm not. He apologized, which I never expected in a million years. For him to apologize, I guess that means I'm not complete dirt in his eyes. That's a low bar to have, but it is what it is and I'm smiling regardless. And, dare I say it, so is he. The absolute faintest of smiles, not obvious or bright yet still warm and soothing to see.

"Get changed," he says, stepping out of the room. "There's more to do today."

I don't know what that may be, but now I don't mind it so much.

"Apology accepted," I call. He looks back at me, that same faint smile returning.

Then the curtain closes and he's gone. It isn't until I look into the mirror that I realize how bad I'm blushing.

✝✝✝

***pats* There you go, Soran, that's how you apologize. Ten points to...I wonder what house he would be in? o.o Quick, friends! What house do you think Soran and Wallie belong to?! I was gonna put Soran in Slytherin but I don't think that fits, what do you think? >.> THIS IS IMPORTANT! (if anyone is curious, I'm a slytherin :D)**

✝Twenty-Nine✝

After Lord Makai purchases our suits (that I am thankfully unaware of the cost of), we head to retrieve shoes. Once more, I'm measured. I didn't even know there were this specific of measurements for feet but, hey, we learn something new everyday. Yet again, I'm left nervously standing about then pleading with Lord Makai to buy the cheapest pair for me at least.

"Why would I do that?" He asks.

"Because I am only wearing them once."

"You don't know that."

"I probably won't wear them often."

"Then they should be an expensive pair, in order to last and remain comfortable for when they are needed."

He's not budging and, well, I guess I'm getting expensive shoes.

A jewelry store is next, but thankfully it is one owned by Lord Makai. Apparently there was an attempted break in yesterday. While he speaks with the shopkeeper, I admire the store. Immaculate, as expected, clean and polished floors with stone columns holding up a dome ceiling. The shop's architecture is rather peculiar compared to the others, but Lord Makai has the funds to make it stand out. Based on the foot traffic, the shop is popular regardless of who owns it.

The shop is rather busy with ladies and their escorts eyeing items sitting within glass cases. A few lords are among them, mostly speaking of gems to gift their lovers or admiring the pocket watches available. Even I stop to inspect a silver pocket watch that is most certainly imbued with magic for the blue surface moves. The edge has intricate linear designs, but at the center are two stars spinning so it appears as one 10 edged piece. They rest within diamonds that do the same, constantly moving with a sun and moon

always directly across from each other along the edges. All that setting atop a blue surface as beautiful as the night sky with sparkling stars.

"Do you like it?"

"Huh?" I glance at Lord Makai that is now standing next to me. I guess he's done talking.

"Ah, yes, it's incredible," I answer with an enthusiastic nod. "How was it made? It must be enchanted."

"It is. A watch that will never stop ticking and do more than just tell time." Lord Makai gestures for the shopkeeper. The keys rattle when she walks. She opens the case and Lord Makai reaches in, holding the watch to me.

"I am not touching that. I'll drop and break it for sure."

"That isn't a problem."

"For you it's—"

Lord Makai presses the watch into my palm. I want to scream but end up staring at it instead. It's too astounding not to stare. I swear there's an enchantment upon it to make you wish to buy it.

But, as Lord Makai suggested, this watch does more than just tell time. Suddenly, the symbols disappear and the gem turns a deep blue. Now it is a compass, the arrow changing direction whenever I spin in place.

"Wow." I whistle, pressing the button to see what the inside has to offer.

Within is the clock, the numbers in roman numerals etched black into solid silver with the cogs visible at the center, but there's a spark. Small sparks like lightning within, must be the magic. As beautiful on the inside as it is out.

"Would you like it wrapped, or prefer to wear it now?"

"W-W-What?" I sputter, staring at the absolute lunatic next to me.

"The pocket watch. We may have it wrapped or you may wear it now."

"I...I, uh, this is—" I point to the price on the glass, which has far too many zeros. "I can't afford this."

"You are not buying it. This is my store."

"I don't need this."

It's the shoe store all over again. Lord Makai is staring at me like I'm the idiot. He's the one offering to freely give away an item that is worth more money than I'll probably make in the next twenty years.

"And what if someone steals it?" I ask, trying to come up with a reason to leave it even if, yes, I'd really like to have it. It's freaking cool! "I'm a mere butler. To have this on me, someone will snag it immediately or think I stole it."

"If that is the case, I will find and dispose of them and we will replace it," Lord Makai answers without hesitation.

I gape.

"You may leave it if you wish," he says, gesturing to the still open case.

"But you'll just have someone bring it to the estate later, won't you?"

"Yes."

I sigh, although on the inside I'm smiling. "I'll wear it...but I'd like a box to store it."

"Very well." Lord Makai informs the shopkeeper. Much like Whiskers, she eyes me suspiciously, but does as she's told.

Yeah, I'm baffled too, lady. This has turned into a very weird day...but, damn it, I am happy about getting the pocket watch. It's really cool!

And once we're in the carriage, I discover it does even more when the exterior nearly blinds me. The blue becomes a blinding light that even Lord Makai hisses at so he ends up having to teach me how to use it, which is basically willing it to do as I ask. If the pocket watch can do it, then it will. Great, now I'm going to be asking the watch for wishes until it works. If I rub it, will a genie grant me three wishes?

"Uh, t-thank you...for the pocket watch," I mumble, still fiddling with the device and, once again, not looking at Lord Makai, only now it's from nerves. "You didn't have to get me any of this. I already accepted your apology."

"Suppose we can count these as apologies in the future when I anger you again."

I smirk, peering across at Lord Makai who is doing the same.

"So you're aware of how anger inducing you are?" I ask.

"I have been informed on occasion."

"Since we're on the topic of apologies," I sigh, thinking back to what I said, from the time we went on our trip to now. "I'm sorry for what I've said."

"And what did you say?"

"When we were on the business trip, I called you twisted and bitter and—" I shake my head. "I shouldn't have said that nor should I have been so immature when you were trying to apologize today."

"What you said was true, no need to apologize. I am all those things and more," Lord Makai responds causing me to frown.

"We all are in our own ways. We have our bad days, some more than others, but it doesn't mean I have the right to react so immaturely."

"You did witness the death of eleven people."

He does have a point there, but he's desperately trying to accept the insults. Something tells me Lord Makai doesn't know how to react or respond to anything other than insult and pain.

"Please let me apologize. I simply shouldn't have said it and, whether you believe it or I said something prior that makes this seem contradicting, you're a good and kind man. Even if you anger or annoy me, that doesn't change that truth either."

My assumption must be correct because Lord Makai is silent and a bit fidgety. His eyes dart about the carriage as if searching for a means to escape. His hands are folded in his lap but they continuously tighten, knuckles turning even whiter. When he opens his mouth to speak, I hold up my hand and say, "I may be stepping out of line, but please don't argue against it. Just say, thank you, Wallie, and accept it."

Lord Makai raises a brow while I smile. I'm waiting, and hoping, that he listens for once. He's watching me with that silent stare again. The one that feels like an observation or maybe it's hiding what he really thinks. Either way, he eventually sighs.

"Thank you, Wallie," he finally says. Now my smile is so big it hurts and Lord Makai looks away, although I don't know why. "And apology accepted."

"That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"I'll really fire you."

"Mm, I don't think you will." I wave the pocket watch in the air. "Even if you did, I could probably live off what I get for this."

He holds out his hand. "Give it back then."

"Nope."

"Wallace."

"Noooooooope."

"You're cleaning the chimney's when we get back."

"That's gonna be another nope, Your Grace."

When Lord Makai chuckles, it makes my toes curl. I wonder if he knows he has dimples? Because they're there. My stomach erupts with the childish sensation of butterflies, something I thought I would not have as a 22 year old adult. Seems that is not the case.

✝✝✝

Here's an extra update this week because I'm the nicest person ever ;D But aw, aren't these two just the cutest? So much flirting ;) Do you think this banter will continue or is this a once in the life time opportunity? lol

✝Thirty✝

"Are you hungry?" Lord Makai asks. "Should we eat before we return?"

"We?" I gesture between us, growing more confused when he nods. "Um...I don't think—is that really appropriate, Your Grace?"

"If you are worried about table manners, there are restaurants with private rooms."

Private rooms? That makes it sound...weird. And by weird, I don't mean anything bad. Well, bad makes it even weirder. Just no. No private rooms with Lord Makai—holy shit, that's worse!

"I'm fine with eating back at the estate," I say with what I hope to be a convincing smile. It's not, because Lord Makai ends up informing the driver to stop at a local restaurant. I sigh heavily. Why does he bother asking if he goes against my answers? Suppose he's used to that though. He always does what he wants anyways, must be nice to always be in charge.

"This is a bit excessive, isn't it?" I mutter under my breath, still opening the restaurant doors for Lord Makai.

"How so?" He asks, walking inside so that the entire place falls silent. All eyes are on us, the lords and ladies forgetting how to breathe upon seeing the famous vampire standing in the entryway.

"Getting a suit, shoes, a fancy pocket watch and now food? Let's just eat at the estate," I whisper, attempting to smile at those that look our way, but they give me the stink eye immediately. Wow, rude.

Lord Makai doesn't respond before a server escorts us upstairs to a private room, dark green in color with warm brown accents and windows taking up the entire wall, allowing us to peer across the city. From our seats, the castle is visible, nearly taking up the entire scenery. I don't think I've ever been so close to the gates before. I even spot guards patrolling and the tops of the

trees in the garden peeking over the stone walls. The outside is lavish and spectacular. I doubt my own imagination could ever conjure what it looks like within.

It isn't until I catch a glimpse of Lord Makai taking a drink out of the corner of my eye that I remember I do have a job. I'm meant to be a butler, although I have no idea how to be one when I'm apparently supposed to be going out to eat with my employer.

Confused, and a bit troubled, I face Lord Makai and ask, "Would...would you like me to refill your drink, My Lord?"

A bottle of wine already sits on the table that the server must have poured earlier. Lord Makai snorts, probably due to my confused tone.

"We're here to have a meal, Wallace, no need to tend to me. There's a server for that," Lord Makai answers, holding up his glass before finishing it off.

"You're being awfully nice." I look around the room. "Is there something I don't know about?"

"What?"

"A prank, is this a prank?"

"Do I seem like the type to prank?"

"Yes, the absolute worst kind to prank, for sure."

Lord Makai smirks. "Well, I take that as a compliment then."

Seems this isn't a prank, although it sure as hell feels like one. Not that I'm complaining, today has been nice considering Lord Makai did apologize, I got an amazing pocket watch and am about to have a meal that I could never dream of affording. Speaking of food, I pick up the menu, but most of the words are foreign. I am still learning my own language so another is way out of my league.

I sigh and set the menu aside.

"What do you typically enjoy to eat?" Lord Makai asks. He's looking over the menu now.

"Nothing from a place like this. I can't even imagine what they have."

"Then are you allergic to anything?"

I shake my head. Lord Makai says nothing.

Guess I'll be getting whatever he decides on. Honestly though, I like food so he can probably get anything on the menu and I'll like it. Lord Makai informs our server what we want. The waiter smiles, although his eyes are shaking with fear. He nearly stumbles on his way out the door causing me to sigh. Everyone is so dramatic.

Seeing as we're here though and I've been dying to ask...

"Why do you eat human food?"

That earns me a confused eyebrow raise.

"I mean, do you need to eat human food?" I ask, watching Lord Makai for any sign of discomfort or annoyance by my question. When all he does is tilt his head to the side, I take that as meaning he's at least ok with the question.

"If you need to drink blood then why do you eat and drink human food?"

"Why do you think?" He responds with a tone of amusement. He sets the wine aside, perching his elbows atop the table and his chin on his enclasped hands. His eyes are half mast. That's a dangerous look.

My throat is dry and my brain is deciding not to function when I mumble, "Because you can?"

"That's a ridiculous reason."

"So you need to eat?"

"No, I don't need it." Lord Makai shakes his head, leaning back in his chair. Now he's scowling, but it doesn't feel directed at me when he replies, "But it does help."

Help stave off the thirst for blood?

Based on how rarely he drinks, I imagine he goes as long as he can before it's too much. I don't know what "too much" is for him. What happens if he doesn't feed regularly? I don't think I want to find out though.

Anyways, since I've been here, it's been as Janein said, about once every two months. Hell, I've only ever seen a girl leave once and she seemed perfectly ok. There's no telling if he even drinks as much as he should. Especially considering I wouldn't say he's in a "better" mood afterwards. In reality, he grows more solemn or simply quiet. I dare not ask about that, seems like too touchy of a topic so I come up with another.

"Does it have any taste to you, food and drinks that is?"

"Suppose I don't have anything to compare it to, but while watching humans I imagine food is rather bland for me. Spice, salt, sweet, it must be extreme in order for me to even notice."

Ah, that explains why his morning tea is so sweet or why I've seen him dump spices on food that would make most sick to their stomach.

"You're asking quite a lot of questions today," says Lord Makai, watching me with a quiet stare.

"You've been answering them."

"So you will ask more if I continue to answer?"

I nod eagerly, which makes Lord Makai shake his head in disbelief.

"You get more peculiar everyday," he teases.

"Is it so peculiar? When getting to know someone, you ask questions."

"I'm not like everyone else."

I frown.

The way Lord Makai said that, I would never say this out loud, but I can hear the absolute defeat in his voice. Although his expression is apathetic, stone cold as ever, it's his eyes that give off a distance that is so obviously put there because of necessity, not want. Right now, I wonder how often he tried to change that but every attempt was thrown back into his face.

How many times did he reach out for help only to be burned?

I don't like that cold stare so I can only hope that I can fix it by saying, "That shouldn't change anything. If one wishes to know you then they must ask. Different doesn't mean bad, and if one chooses to believe that then they aren't the kind of person you want to get to know anyways."

Lord Makai turns away. He glares at the castle in the distance. I imagine he doesn't like the view as much as I do, but he says nothing of it.

"You are full of such wise words today," he eventually responds. "Who did you hear them from?"

"I'll have you know I came up with them myself."

"I seriously doubt that."

"Then you're seriously wrong."

"Quite accusatory today as well. Should I add cleaning the gutters to your list of duties?"

I finally take a drink of the wine that was poured for me as well. I'm thirsty and Lord Makai doesn't say anything about it. Smacking my lips together afterwards, I continue the teasing by saying, "If I fall and die then it'll be your fault."

"I am fairly certain it will be yours for being a klutz."

"This so called klutz is about to accidentally spill wine all over you."

"You should never reveal your plan before going through with it."

He's pissing me off again, but seeing a soft smile playing on his lips, hidden behind a glass of wine, makes me feel that it's alright. More than alright.

Somehow it's growing more and more comfortable being with the one person that others claim is meant to cause discomfort. I seriously believe others may be the true crazy ones.

However, our pleasant conversation is put to a sudden stop when Lord Makai stiffens. His cheerful demeanor dissipates in a mere second. His eyes flash a brilliant red, teeth grinding behind his lips.

Then there's a knock at the door mere moments later. I face the door while Lord Makai growls before it even opens. He sets his drink aside and actually glances to me with a glare, but somehow I know it isn't meant for me. I raise a brow just as two men walk in.

One is clearly a butler, dressed similarly to me in a black suit with his head down; dark brown hair slicked back nicely. In front of him though is clearly a lord; dressed from head to toe in a white suit with gold lining that matches the gold of his wavy hair. His deep green eyes fixate on Lord Makai, who stands, and I'm quick to follow.

Good thing too considering what Lord Makai says next.

"How unfortunate to run into you here, Your Highness."

I'm not sure what kind of expression I'm making, but I can guess it's foolish while looking up the heir to the Aberian throne, Cathen Baylor.

Prince Baylor is not someone to take lightly. None of the royal family are, but there are many rumors surrounding the prince, who gives off the glow of celestial being. The eyes, however, tell another story; one of a man that is aware of his charms and uses them to his advantage, always hiding behind a smile and kind words laced with deceit.

"Lord Makai, you truly hurt me with your words," Prince Baylor says with an angelic smile. "Just once, could you pretend to be happy to see me?"

"No."

I wish I could show the same defiance Lord Makai does, holy shit.

"As blunt as ever I see, but I suppose that means I do not need to ask how you're doing. You've made it clear." Prince Baylor suddenly turns his gaze to me; the gaze of a predator admiring its prey. As prey, the only sensation I'm feeling is to run, but my legs are frozen in place.

"Who might this be?" asks the prince with an advancing step.

"M-My name is Wallace Jonessan, Your Highness. I-I am a butler for House Makai," I answer quickly with a swift bow; one I refuse to stop until His Highness chuckles.

"I like you, Wallace. You show far more respect than your uncultured master. You may rise."

With a nod, I do as I'm told but switch back and forth between a lowered gaze and curious one, although I don't know if it's out of respect or fear. Maybe a bit of both.

"Have you received your royal invitation for the Day of Aberia?" asks Prince Baylor when facing Lord Makai.

Finally, I feel like I can breathe again. For some reason, the prince gives me the chills, or maybe it's the icy glares the two continue to give one another. There's certainly no respect shared between them, not that I expected any.

"I have." Lord Makai sighs, showing his obvious disinterest. "I presume Your Highness will make yet another spectacle this year."

"Why what else is there to do at a grand ball?" Prince Baylor laughs yet it doesn't sound amused in the least. "I would think you out of all of us would wish to have a little fun. It must be so taxing to be so serious all these years."

"Not at all."

"Always such a stick in the mud." Prince Baylor's attention turns to me once more. When he smirks, I take an unintentional step back.

"Will Wallace be attending with you?" He gestures to our table, where it is obvious we shared a meal. "You two seem to be...quite close."

I don't like the way he said that, or the way he's focusing on me. Lord Makai might actually feel the same based on his quick response hissed between clenched teeth, "Pestering a butler for fun now, are we? Doesn't the prince have more important matters to attend to?"

"Pestering?" Prince Baylor's strides are swift until he stands directly in front of me, watching my every move. Even with Lord Makai's menacing aura across the table, the prince doesn't even flinch. "Am I pestering you, Wallace?"

I feel like this is a trick question; one that I haven't the courage to answer.

"Step back," Lord Makai orders, but I'm not sure who he is referring to.

"Quite close indeed," Prince Baylor whispers, finally retreating with a twisted grin. He doesn't say goodbye, simply turns to walk away as he speaks, "I enjoyed our little chat and look forward to seeing you both at the palace."

Once at the door, Prince Baylor glances back but only to me. "It was such a pleasure meeting you, Wallie."

The nickname shouldn't mean so much, but it does.

He said it as if he knows that's what I prefer to be called. Judging by his words, and the fact that I know the imperial family has spies on the estate, it is likely because he does actually know. Such a thought makes my blood run cold, and I remain that way even after Prince Baylor disappears.

Lord Makai is in a foul mood. His jaw is clenched, grinding from side to side. Our dinner is over, I know this before he even calls for the bill. And

once in the carriage there is only silence.

When we return to the estate, Lord Makai says nothing about Prince Baylor, nor do I. Our day comes to an end, the warmth of earlier frozen in a single moment.

✝✝✝

Wow, quite the chapter and I didn't cut it up as much cause I hated the flow of it >.> So here we are...learning that Soran eating does help in some way, but how? And we've met a member of the royal family, Prince Baylor. The atmosphere certainly wasn't pleasant =/ Is it ok for Wallie to attend the ball with Soran now or is it a little too late to stop? And what do you think of the relationship between Cathen and Soran, or the royal family in general?

✝Thirty-One✝

With the Day of Aberia nearly upon us, there is much work to be done at the estate. Admittedly, I was shocked to learn Lord Makai respects the common traditions for the celebration. Out of everyone, I suspected him to be the most likely person to curse the day, maybe even literally.

However, hanging from the stairways and ceilings are glittering gold stars and suns that reflect golden light through the halls like fireflies in the night. They are meant to represent the light gifted to us from Goddess Aena, how we came to be through light and how we will continue on through light.

On the doorways are wreaths made of silver and gold vines, a sign of welcoming and invitation for Aena to bless us, while table runners and carpets are replaced to match the color scheme. Confetti has been purchased, waiting to be popped and thrown on the blessed day. History books say that when the war ended, there was little ways to celebrate so the people snatched up the remnants of old, burned and ruined tapestries and books to throw in the only celebration they could. As a way to honor that, we continue to do so only we don't tear up books. Hael would probably hate this day if that were the case.

The kitchen staff is especially chaotic, preparing a great feast with fine wines and baked goods. Some of those goods will be offered to the temple, although many noble households give much more than that; like gold, silver and priceless gems.

Lord Makai specifically offers up an abundance of food for at risk families and orphaned children (and does so regularly throughout the year anyways), but everyone and their mother chooses to ignore. Ok, ok, let's not talk about the good. Aena forbid Lord Makai show any form of kindness! The world would end!

The halls and bedrooms are cleaned to perfection and Lord Makai's own ballroom is being decorated and prepared for a small concert to be held.

There are a select few songs that are always played, many of which are now being continuously hummed amongst the staff. Some even dance, practicing for the night that is celebrated among the rich and the poor.

I can't help but wonder if all estates do so much though. Does every royal or aristocrat allow their workers such luxuries? I wish I could figure it out then rub it in everyone's face when they try to badmouth Lord Makai again.

I sigh at such a thought, which I've been getting more and more lately. It isn't my job to defend him, but lately it's been difficult to listen to others be so rude to him, even if he has been avoiding me since we saw Prince Baylor in town. That was two weeks ago.

At first I thought he was being more elusive to everyone, but when requesting to take his morning tea up I was informed that Layne was specifically told not to switch with me. That definitely was a shock. I'm not sure what I did but any time I see Lord Makai he doesn't so much as say hello, only locks himself in his office, his bedroom, or disappears entirely.

There's no denying my disappointment. After our day in town, I admit that I had some expectations; some of which I rather not think of or rather not admit to. I thought we'd speak more, not just about work but joking around like we were. Thinking that it hasn't happened, while continuing to hope that it will, has put quite a damper on my mood that others have noticed.

"You've been awfully blue lately," says Hael as he leans on his mop.

We're mopping the ballroom right now with me being less than enthusiastic and Hael putting in far more work.

"Something wrong?" He asks.

"Not really."

"Doesn't seem like it."

"Does Lord Makai always attend the celebrations at the castle?" I ask out of the blue.

Since Lord Makai is avoiding me, we haven't discussed the odd run in with Prince Baylor. Thinking on it sends a shiver down my spine. I haven't mentioned seeing him either. I don't know, just feels like something I should keep secret.

"That's quite the change of topic, but ok, I'll take it." Hael continues to work as he talks. "Not always, but when he does avoid it he gets punished, so it seems."

"Punished how?"

"When I first arrived it was a year he skipped and not even two weeks later His Majesty sent men to search for illegal contraband."

"Huh?"

"They claimed his books made no sense, that there had to be another way he was making money. They made a mess of the place while Lord Makai watched."

I want to roll my eyes because that has to be a bullshit lie. "Why did he let them?"

"Maybe he was feeling generous and didn't feel like slaughtering a bunch of men that were only following orders."

"That's ridiculous, uh, the searching part not the not killing people part."

"Got ya."

"So he doesn't have a good relationship with anyone from the royal family?"

Hael shrugs. "Not that I know of, but he doesn't seem to have a good relationship with anyone. Period."

I twist my hands around the handle of the broom. That hurt a bit, even if I understand why Hael said it. Part of me wants to argue that we have a good

relationship, but that may not be true and it's probably not something I should share.

So I only nod and get back to work, continuing to ponder over the relationship between Lord Makai and the royal family.

Saying there's bad blood between them is an understatement. Lord Makai would have been an emperor if not for the Baylor's, although I doubt that is a title he wishes to possess. Then there's the fact that the royals have been pestering Lord Makai since the beginning. The hatred must only continue to grow, but at some point shouldn't there be someone that realizes it's useless to keep on fighting?

Lord Makai could be their greatest ally if they treated him like one. With such thoughts, maybe it's proof I'm not meant for politics.

Politics are about your own power, not others. Although all smile and shake hands with claims to be friends, in the back of their mind there's always a contingency plan. There's a loophole or another waiting to pounce should one grow even the least bit distrustful of others. Politics is all about being one step ahead of your opponent and with Lord Makai, no one would ever really be one step ahead. That makes him even more frightening.

Everyday I'm reminded just how unfortunate his circumstances are. And everyday I tell myself not to dwell on it yet here I am, dwelling on it again. Way to go, Wallie.

After the ballroom, I and a few other butlers are requested to bring down some extra chairs and tables from the attic. Passing through the second floor means that yes, I glance to Lord Makai's office a few times. Only once I catch him stepping out.

I raise my hand to wave like some kind of idiot, but he doesn't even look at me. He heads downstairs and I'm left feeling disappointed, again. So I go about my work as I'm meant to, trying to act like I'm not bothered when I definitely am.

Should I just storm into his office and hope he'll speak with me? Maybe I should threaten to toss the pocket watch out the window? I don't know, but if he could stop avoiding me that'd be great!

It's mid afternoon when the ballroom is finally ready for the celebration in only a few days time. It has been yet another long day of work and I'm finishing up my usual duties on the second floor when I notice a slightly open door at the far end of the east hallway, past Lord Makai's room.

To be honest, I've never gone past Lord Makai's room. The hall isn't off limits, but the rooms are so there's never been a point for me to go. That makes me more curious though. The doors that are left, the ones that are never open, what's in them?

So it's probably why I'm so fixated on that slightly ajar door. I don't know what's in there. Only Higra and Layne are permitted to clean them, even Hael has said he has never seen what's inside. There's no noise coming from them either so I step a little closer, calling for Higra or Layne and asking if they are in need of assistance.

Neither answer though as I finally step in front of the room.

✝✝✝

So fun to add bits and pieces of the world like The Day of Aberia and how they celebrate their goddess ^^ Hope you enjoyed that little tidbit! Hael is reinforcing that the royals and Soran are really not friendly. He seems to get some special treatment, huh? But not in a good way >.> And, uh oh, is Wallie about to get into something he shouldn't?

✝Thirty-Two✝

I'm hesitant to peer inside until realization sets in that it's a perfectly normal bedroom. Pressing my hand to the door, I swing it open just a bit more to reveal a portion of the room, which is similar to Lord Makai's yet somehow more lived in.

There's a friendly sitting area. A couch faces a white stone fireplace and an armchair at its side. In that armchair is a half finished blue and white blanket with sewing needles and a ball of blue yarn in a woven basket. The rug is a little worn out, like there has been constant movement atop it and there's even a little brown teddy bear in the corner of the couch.

It isn't the blanket or the sewing needles or the bear that has me freezing in place though. No, it's a painting that is half concealed by the door that has my eyes going wide.

Across the room, between the balcony doors and a wide window, is a large painting with deep brown trim. In that painting is a man that I recognize yet don't because I've never seen Lord Makai with such a cheerful expression. Even his deep red eyes are bright as he sits with a young girl in his lap, probably no older than seven. Her light brown hair is curled around her thin shoulders with dark green ribbons in her hair that match the color of her eyes. She's holding the brown teddy bear in one hand and Lord Makai's fingers in the other. Beside her there are clearly more people as I can make out a woman's shoulder and a hand on said shoulder, but nothing more.

When I attempt to push the door open further though, it suddenly slams shut so fast that it smacks me in the face. I'm rubbing my soon to be very bruised nose when I hear a familiar growl, "Snooping, are we?"

The door is locked with a loud click, and standing beside said door is none other than Lord Makai with a menacing scowl. His red eyes are alight and focused solely on me, which sends a shiver down my spine.

"I didn't...the door was open," I explain as if I think that will help.

Judging by the shaking in his clenched hands or the slight movement of his jaw, he's furious for even glancing in there. Far more furious than he has been, especially towards me, for a very long time. Cold air consumes the hall. I question whether it's my imagination. He takes a menacing step closer but I stand my ground, uncertain of what's to come.

"So you decided you had the right to look inside rather than close it?"

"I...I'm sorry, I didn't—" I stop myself before I even finish since it would be a lie. I did mean to. I knew what I was doing. The rooms have always been locked up. Only Higra and Layne are permitted entrance. Rather than lie, I admit, "I shouldn't have done it and I'm sorry. It was wrong of me. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

The anger in Lord Makai turns to disbelief. His hands go limp at his side, although his jaw is still grinding. His forehead creases and nose wrinkles, as if he has tasted something sour..

I'm quick to explain myself. "None of us are allowed back here so it was weird for the door to be open. First I thought Higra or Layne needed help, but when I saw they weren't there I looked in because...well, I was curious, but I shouldn't have done it. It clearly upset you so I won't do it again, I promise."

The red of Lord Makai's eyes diminish. His neck cracks when he uncomfortably rolls his shoulders. By now, I expect to be yelled at, but it's obvious he's holding himself back. He turns away from me, shoulders shaking with rage that he refuses to show. His voice, however, is not as easily controlled when he growls, "Don't do it again."

"I won't."

"And don't speak a word about it."

I want to ask what "it" is, but Lord Makai has already stormed off, disappearing downstairs to who knows where. It isn't until he's out of view

that I realize I'm shaking too. From the tip of my toes to the top of my head, I'm quivering like a leaf in a storm. I press my back to the wall and run my fingers through my hair.

"That could have been worse," I whisper, glancing once more at the locked door that isn't as innocent as it seems. Seeing the door reminds me of what I saw behind it; a painting that implies much more than Lord Makai likely wishes any to know or even guess. Now there are even more questions surrounding him.

Whose room is this? Or whose room was this?

No one has ever been seen coming in or out yet it has more personality than Lord Makai's room. What was up with the blanket and the teddy bear and, most of all, the painting? Who was that girl? Who else was in the painting?

I rub the back of my neck with a heavy sigh. A headache is coming on and for good reason. I don't want to risk asking Hael. He'll either be suspicious as to why I keep asking about Lord Makai or he may guess I saw something I wasn't supposed to. My only option is to attempt finding answers from a book.

I hesitate to do so even if my studies have been coming along great. I'm capable of reading some books, but I struggle with those located in Lord Makai's libraries. They're massive, some as heavy as a brick. They lay spread out across the table in the library. The fire crackles in the distance, warming the room as I contemplate if snooping is the best option. At this rate it's the only option, and the more I'm here the more I suspect that Lord Makai's past is shrouded in mystery because someone wants it to be. Not necessarily Lord Makai, maybe the royals, maybe everyone.

I'll just take a peak, at least at some timelines or family trees. Although many books are too advanced for me, my search continues after work hours. I dig out any having to do with family history and the only discovery I find is that it's messed up beyond belief.

Thankfully there are drawings in one of the books leading back 2400 years ago. In the beginning the Makai family was revered for their strength,

prowess and advanced battle strategies. Once nothing more than a family of farmers, they rose up against invaders and expanded the lands until it grew into the empire of Aberia. There were countless Emperor's afterwards, some better than others. Emperor Elyon is a prime example of how bad times can change when someone with power is a fucking lunatic.

There's simply a bloodbath after Elyon. With 19 children in total, the obsessed lunatic was worried they'd plot against him. Before ordering his Priests to search for answers to immortality, he rounded up all his children to be slaughtered. None survived and I think it's safe to assume Lord Makai wouldn't have either had Emperor Elyon lived. What a messed up family.

After that there's mentions of Lord Makai, mostly his business ventures, but nothing more. And he has no books specifically dedicated to about his life in the library. Maybe that'd be weird to have around, but I also wonder if anyone has ever even attempted to write one.

Has anyone ever cared?

"Damn," I groan after yet another failed attempt at finding answers. There certainly is no mention of a young girl living with Lord Makai, not in any of these books at least. I wish to ask, but with his reaction it is obvious he doesn't want to speak of it. There is no reason for him to confide in me nor do I have the right to pressure him about it...

But the situation here is growing fishier by the day. So much is unknown about the vampire that everyone claims to know so much about. How can they when the vast majority of his past is unwritten?

Putting together the facts; lack of written history, secret closed off rooms, bad reaction when said room is discovered, no mention of this girl or whoever else is in the picture and—

"So you have lost someone you've cared deeply about?"

"No. I've never had anyone like that."

"Surely there must have been someone."

"No."

And a question I once asked that lead to a rather telling response.

Fishy indeed. Taking in his age, the people in the painting are likely long dead...but who are they? How did they die, and does it have to do with Lord Makai's isolation now? What is it that Lord Makai is hiding and why?

✝✝✝

Most people suspected Wallie catching someone spying or Soran performing dark magic but, oh, it was neither of those things! Who was the girl in the painting? Who else could be in that painting and why is there no information about them, or even Soran? And if that's in one of the closed off rooms, what could be in the others? =O At least Wallie survived his snooping, honesty does work best with Soran ^_^

✝Thirty-Three✝

The "avoiding Wallie" game is still going strong. I don't see Lord Makai at all, not even brief glimpses in the halls. I'm waiting to be told I won't be attending the ball, either due to my mistake or even the accidental meeting with Prince Baylor, but time passes and I receive no such order.

The Day of Aberia has arrived.

I'm following Layne upstairs to join Lord Makai in his carriage. We're to head into town to ready ourselves; apparently even butlers are expected to have nice hair, oh joy!

We're both already dressed for the occasion. The blue suit Lord Makai purchased fits perfectly, almost freakishly so. I'm not accustomed to such high end attire so it almost feels weird to wear it, whereas Layne appears far more comfortable in his deep green suit.

"Do you remember the most important rule I told you?" asks Layne while we wait at the front doors for Lord Makai.

"Don't drink or eat anything."

Layne nods.

"I can't believe we're going to the palace and I can't even risk trying the food," I whine, earning a smirk from Layne.

"It's safest not to accept anything offered at the palace."

"So...how does this normally work?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"I imagine Lord Makai hates these parties. The royals aren't fond of him either."

Layne frowns. "Certainly not. This won't be fun, I can say that."

"I admit I'm a bit disappointed even if I suspected it."

"Most of the evening will be spent listening to aristocrats kissing up to Lord Makai then spitting behind his back while he's crueler than ever."

"How so?"

"I doubt a single kind word will be spoken by His Grace this evening. Worry not, most of our time will be spent standing on the sidelines."

"Is it normal for a butler to attend this ball?" I ask. "I imagine there's enough at the palace."

"It's rare, and even if they are brought they typically wait outside with the carriage or in another room. However, Lord Makai is on his own at the palace. Never doubt what they may try to do. I suspect our presence is more necessary to keep him from going completely mad while there."

"Ah, I see."

Layne suddenly leans over to whisper, "I suggest you avoid the royal family though, particularly His Majesty and the crown prince."

Already messed that up seeing as I met Cathen weeks ago. Based on what he said, he'll probably seek me out, which is a frightening thought.

"They'll do anything to get under Lord Makai's skin."

"Isn't that an awful idea?" I ask, confused why anyone would go up against Lord Makai. We are but cockroaches that can be squashed beneath his boot. Why continuously bother?

"Logically, yes, but there's no logic when it comes to greed. Suppose they like to remind him that they can cause harm even if it isn't in the physical sense, or even to him personally."

I never had high regards for the royal family, but now I think even less of them.

Our talk ends with the appearance of Lord Makai. My cheeks grow warm while admiring his picturesque attire, the familiar black and red suit that compliments his broad shoulders and long legs. He's always dressed up, but tonight is even more elegant. Every step he takes is calculated, smooth movements and brooding confidence.

My stomach twists into a knot when he brushes by without a word. I'm no longer certain if it has to do with nerves or disappointment.

The carriage is silent. Layne sits gracefully in front of Lord Makai. Admittedly, that hurts. My chest aches and I refuse to accept that it's jealousy, only it continues to gnaw at me. But no supposed jealousy or disappointment can outweigh the utter nerves and fascination that comes upon pulling up to the castle gates that evening.

The castle is more grand than most could possibly imagine. Even the gates are exquisite, white stones perfectly placed to tower high into the heavens. The twisted goldenrods of the gate don't even creak when it opens. Guards line the peppered cobblestone road leading past plains of lush grass, intricate stone fountains and great gardens of exotic flowers. The scent mixes into a heavenly aroma that soothes my nerves.

In the distance are multiple estates all belonging to the royal family, each spectacular in its own right. But at the center of them all is the crown jewel where the throne sits, where the king writes his decrees and passes laws, anything and everything important in a castle with stone columns and arched stained glass windows. Golden suns and stars consume the yard as well as dangle from rounded terraces that are now in full view. From a distance the castle appears big, but in person it's massive and impossible to take in all at once.

The carriage comes to a stop and it takes all my concentration not to trip out of said carriage after the door opens. Before us is a world I can never fully comprehend. Lords and ladies dressed in extravagant garbs float elegantly across a golden carpet lining the exterior of the castle. Granite stairs lead

into a grand foyer with a chandelier of diamonds casting a warm light. Jewel embedded staircases and gnarled railings lead the turned stairs to the second floor, but all walk to the left where the grand ballroom awaits.

Inside are all the elite Aberia has to offer. No genius is needed to guess that either when all are dressed to impress. Not a single hair is out of place or dress out of fashion. Beautiful gems adorn tiara's and necks while gold cufflinks and pocket watches hang from jackets and blazers. Above the room is a chandelier of gold with small silver wall sconces that cast a soft light over the buzzing crowd.

In the far right corner of the room is a small orchestra playing a soft tune. Some are already seen dancing gracefully, heels clicking to the beat of the songs. White tables line the left side of the ballroom where some are seated drinking wine and discussing what I could never dream to understand.

However, time forgets how to function the moment Lord Makai steps in.

Conversations quiet to hushed whispers. Dancers freeze or stumble over their feet. The crowd parts without a word, heads lowered as Lord Makai's footsteps become explosive claps in the chilled room. All eyes are on us, even after Lord Makai is seated at an empty table far from others.

The music grows louder. I didn't even notice the orchestra pause, and all try to return to what they were doing prior. I say try because the hair on the back of my neck stands at attention. When I risk peering over my shoulder, at least five tables of aristocrats are staring at Lord Makai without care.

It's now that I realize, we're in a room full of enemies.

"Your Grace!" calls an unfamiliar voice that belongs to a man likely well into his forties with a curled mustache and graying brown hair. His eyes are but crescent shapes when he smiles seemingly so sweetly, but Lord Makai's response is that of apathy.

"What a pleasure, what an absolute pleasure to be seeing you here. His Royal Majesty will be ecstatic with your attendance, as am I. I've heard

business is booming for the Makai name. Quite a few shops have already opened in my home of Delyore."

Lord Makai actually rolls his eyes while letting out a sigh so heavy that my own shoulders grow strained. His Grace speaks with disdain laced through every hissed word, "I am not saddened to say that I do not share the same enthusiasm as you, Lord Romain. My evening would be much better without your attendance but, please, do sit. I know you will anyways."

I eye Layne, who purses his lips as if to say, *I told you so.*

Lord Romain does sit, as do a few other noblemen. Although we keep a distance, their conversation is barely broken up only by others. Bits and pieces reach my ears, talks of business ventures and requests for partnerships that are shot down before even a sentence can be uttered. Then the men laugh heartily, so much so that a blindman would think this to be a crowd of friends rather than a pack of wolves waiting to pounce.

But Lord Makai sits with poised elegance, one leg thrown over the other and his hands placed gently in his lap. His eyes have no issue leaving the faces of others while those around him appear too frightened to risk averting their gaze. As if they believe, should they turn their head they will swiftly lose it.

Then the ladies join, taking a seat by their partners or gathering in a table nearby to listen or join in on the conversation. Some are weary, keeping a distance, while others are giggling away at bad jokes. The longer I watch and listen, the worse I feel. Dare I say it, I question whether this is a dream or reality. Feels as if the room is distorting, twisting and caving in as their smiles turn twisted and voices cracked until Lord Makai is but the single "normal" person here while the others are monsters of flickering flames.

The cry of horns awake me from the illusion.

The crowd turns to the front of the ballroom where a staircase leads to double doors on the second floor. Guards stand at attention in polished silver while trumpet men stand atop the stairs in the royal colors of blue and gold. Their cheeks grow redder with every loud puff of the trumpet until,

presumably, the head butler calls out over the now silent crowd, "Announcing His Royal Majesty, Rufus Ileticus Baylor and His Royal Highness Cathen Avenciti Baylor!"

Everyone kneels with their heads bowed; save for Lord Makai.

In my peripheral vision, I find him sitting in place with his eyes fixated on the red wine gently swaying in his glass. He takes a drink, uncaring of the double doors opening to reveal King Rufus Baylor and Prince Cathen Baylor. Both enter dramatically in form fitted suits littered with metals of their achievements adorning their chests and gold capes thrown over their shoulders

It's my first time laying eyes on His Majesty and, well, Cathen is a spitting image of him.

I believe King Baylor is in his fifties yet he doesn't look anywhere out of his late thirties, early forties at the absolute most. Not a single gray hair can be seen among his fine golden locks. The only telling factor of his age are the crow lines around his deep set green eyes that only give him an air of kindness when he smiles warmly from above.

Once the remainder of the royal family is announced, King Baylor takes a stand at the edge of the balcony.

"Welcome, welcome friends and family!" He calls with open arms. "Please rise, let us celebrate this blessed day when our first king, Avenciti Baylor, pulled our forces together to defeat the horrendous reign of the late Emperor Makai. Let us thank Aena for her guidance during such dark days and pray she guide us through any that may yet come."

"May Aena's light bless Aberia. May she bring us peace!" cries the crowd. They now stand, clapping joyously as the royal family descends the stairs. Most are reaching out to shake hands and talk animatedly with their guests while Lord Makai is impatiently tapping his nails against the glass.

Looking at him, I get the distinct feeling he suspects King Baylor purposely chose to mention the late emperor to single Lord Makai out; to piss him off

by reminding him of bad memories. I think my assumption is proven by how quickly Lord Makai drinks his wine in a single take.

Suddenly, Lord Makai looks to me. He says nothing. I even turn to inspect if he's looking at someone else, except no one is behind me. When I face him again, his gaze remains.

Layne is raising a brow while I put on a smile. Like I've said before, it's a knee jerk reaction. It seems that knee jerk reaction is ok because, dare I say it, when Lord Makai turns away his shoulders appear to have relaxed. He lets out a deep breath and the tapping stops.

My stomach knots again. This time it has nothing to do with disappointment.

Shit, my face feels warm.

I press the back of my hand to my cheek to find out that yes, my face is very warm. With my head down, I ask, "Um, are we allowed to use the bathroom?"

Layne snickers. "Yes, Wallie. It's doubtful His Grace wishes us to piss our pants while at the royal palace."

I purse my lips at the teasing. Layne orders me to ask a worker of the castle to guide me so I slip away just as His Majesty begins to make his way to Lord Makai's table.

Once a kind butler showed me the way to the servant quarters bathrooms, I can breathe again. I needed to get out of there. The room is like a world of its own; toxic and suffocating. And with my face heating up because of a simple stare it's obvious I need a talking to!

"Get it together, Wallie. Get it together." I slap my face a few times, peering into the mirror with as much determination as I can muster. "Don't act a fool. Do your job. You got this."

Why don't I believe myself? Whatever, let's just get back to work!

Recalling the route back to the ball room is easy, suppose it's my time spent on the Makai estate that I now remember directions. However, there's a familiar figure leaning in the hall just before the lobby.

Light and laughter echo through the halls while shadows pass by followed by the sharp clicking of heels, yet somehow my ears are ringing with silence when my eyes lay upon Prince Baylor.

✝✝✝

Funny story, I accidentally updated at 2am on Tapas xD So here I am, updating it on Wattpad at 3am, oops lol Anyways, Wallie, you're still adorable even when you're jealous! Soran, you are also adorable cause even you're getting more obvious lol But uh oh, Wallie is about to have a run in with the prince! Is something going to happen? =O

***cough cough* if you must know, I am very ahead on my patreon *cough cough* shameless self promo *cough cough* https://www.patreon.com/Twoony**

✝Thirty-Four✝

Third Person P.O.V

Soran has always held a strong distaste of social gatherings for obvious reasons. From time to time, the lone vampire wonders if he would feel differently had he been human. Would he enjoy the pleasant strum of a harp that lulled couples into a fond dance? Would he laugh among friends over a glass of wine? Could he step into a room without garnering the negative attention of all? What was that like?

Such thoughts are often discarded in a mere second for Soran has learned he would never get the answers. But for some reason he could not discard them so easily today. As he listens to the music and tastes a dull red wine, his eyes wander to the blue-eyed butler waiting anxiously nearby. Wallie has always worked so hard to come across as confident and poised, but his eyes hold a certain sense of curiosity and wonder that can never be hidden. He peers about the room with practically every question in his mind etched into his features clear as day. Then when those eyes land on Soran, they brighten whether he realizes it or not and he smiles without delay. Not forced nor taught nor even out of respect or politeness, a simple reaction that Soran never receives from others without a sense of bitterness.

Wallie, however, has a smile that is never bitter, only appreciated.

And those thoughts of a fond dance to the pleasant strum of a harp, laughing among friends over a glass of wine and stepping into a room without a care, they linger and linger only this time there's one common factor to all. Wallie is the one dancing with Soran and Wallie is the one he laughs with and Wallie is the one waiting in that room with his beaming smile and soft blue eyes. And Wallie does not judge or glare or berate him. He's just there, waiting, a constant warmth.

Such thoughts are not like Wallie's smile though. They aren't appreciated because they *are* bitter since they are untrue. A future that will never be so

Soran downs another glass of wine that is as dull as everything else. He sits among enemies waiting for the night to end yet he continues to glance at Wallie whenever he feels like it's too much. Seeing him eases the tension in Soran's shoulders, even if it's only for a moment. But that tension multiplies tenfold when Soran's gaze meets with Rufus' across the room. When the king smiles, Soran knows what is to come. He sighs heavily.

"Lord Makai, I am so happy you could make it," says Rufus when he takes a seat that was quickly emptied for him. The aristocrats that were previously pestering Soran scattered like roaches to allow the two some privacy.

King Rufus Baylor is a man made for politics. Every personality trait has practically been crafted since birth to make the beast. Each word is placed just so to ensure the reaction Rufus wishes. Every smile is adjusted and passed for a purpose, but that charismatic facade has never, and will never, fool Soran. And Rufus doesn't try all that hard with the vampire anyway, only to keep face among others.

"I am sure you are. There's nothing like a common enemy to bring everyone together," Soran responds with a narrowed glare.

"Come now, that is simply history. It was in no way a direct attack. Relax a little."

"I have been trying to relax for over a thousand years, but there is a family that loves to pester and will never allow such a luxury. Perhaps you could do something about that, Your Majesty."

Rufus snickers. He surveys the room, smiling at guests when they happen to catch his eye. After a quick drink, the king says, "It is always the most fun speaking with you, Soran. Refreshing really; to hear someone's unfiltered thoughts, but I did stop in hopes to thank you for your cooperation as of late."

Soran grinds his teeth. Rufus could have stated as such in a letter. He forced Soran to come because he loves to be a pain in the ass, because he loves to watch Soran be surrounded by those that want him dead. Although

immortality is his, it has yet to take away the frustration that comes with being the most hated man in the room.

"Your assistance is most appreciated concerning our recent trouble," says Rufus. "I've pardoned your transgressions and assured the families of the deceased that you regret your crime. They have promised not to ask for punishment."

"How thoughtful of you, Your Majesty. I would be relieved if I had been worried in the first place. Know that any further assistance will be determined based on your future actions. Should you, or any of the royal family, be of annoyance to me I will happily retract my research into the Unborn. You may risk the lives of your men instead."

"We wouldn't have to risk those lives, nor would you have to give up your valuable time, if you only taught us what you knew of vilis."

Soran chuckles this time. "How often have I heard that suggestion? You act as if I have all the answers; rather you hope that I do, but I've told you time and time again that I do not have the answers you seek."

Rufus' eyes narrow although his smile remains.

"Do you still not believe that I know little more than you?"

"Of course. I am well aware you have had correspondence with Karsissia and Quelen, how could you not know considerably more?" Rufus asks but the question is rhetorical.

Rolling his eyes, Soran decides to tease by saying, "Fine, I will tell you what I've learned. Does the name Alita Baylor sound familiar to you?"

Rufus doesn't answer.

"It should. I'm sure she was mentioned in my history. She was my—" Soran sneers. "Caretaker—after the fall of Emperor Elyon. Can you guess one of the very few lessons she taught me?"

"I am certain it wasn't manners as you have yet to learn those even now."

"Must run in the family as I've never met a Baylor with manners."

The king scowls. Soran doesn't care.

"Alita was adamant in her beliefs, the belief that a vampire's presence would bring about, for lack of a better description, the end of the world. I heard such accusations daily for many years and believed them for some time, but I've grown up. I've learned what this supposed calamity is."

"Do tell," says Rufus, although his lack of interest is obvious by his monotone voice.

"A vampire's presence is to be feared, but not for the powers they possess, only the powers that they promise."

Rufus raises a brow, finally showing interest.

"Greed is arguably the worst sin of all for when one realizes the power they can possess they will do anything to obtain it. And I am the embodiment of power." Soran holds out his hands as if to show himself off like a piece of art. "Forever young, forever here, and forever powerful. If I can possess such attributes then so can another, that's the thought that my very presence puts into the minds of others. That greed is what leads to calamity as we've seen it happen before with my own father. He is an example of what not to do yet still others desperately seek the same answers."

Rufus' joyous facade slips, revealing the cold, calculating man that Soran has always seen him as. His glass shakes when he growls, "What exactly are you implying, Lord Makai?"

"I'm implying that every now and again there are ones like you; greedy old men hoping to escape the inevitability of death."

"You dare—"

When Soran suddenly stands, Rufus nearly falls out of his chair. His hand grips the table when Soran stands at his side, leaning over to speak, "I've dealt with those like you before, countless times. No matter how much you

try, you will never get the answers from me. But please, continue wasting what little time you have left trying. Eventually death will take you and I will be here to see it, forever young, forever immortal and forever powerful."

Soran's smile is as cold as a winter's night while Rufus shakes with rage.

When Soran steps back, he offers an exaggerated bow. "That is what I've learned, Your Royal Majesty."

"Thank you for the invitation, but I will be taking my leave," says Soran, uncaring of the furious glare Rufus is sending him.

The king stands as proudly as he can. He adjusts his jacket and clears his throat. "Such a pity, but it was...a pleasure speaking with you, Lord Makai. We'll speak again soon."

"I'm sure we will."

With that, Soran goes to call for Layne and Wallie only to realize he is missing one butler.

✝✝✝

A little bit more of Soran's perspective for all of you ^^ Also him being sassy, gotta love that. So what do you think of Soran's thoughts concerning his immortality and the normal lives of others? And what do you think of what Soran said about greed? I think his thought process is super interesting and I admit it took me a while to really consider what he'd say in this situation. I hope it comes across as badass as I imagine it lol

✝Thirty-Five✝

Wallie P.O.V.

There is likely a time in everyone's life when they are faced with a dilemma that has an obvious answer but that answer is one they cannot achieve themselves. Currently, I am faced with such a dilemma; a dilemma by the name of Prince Baylor.

Music drifts from the ballroom but the soft sound does not ease me. My toes curl in my shoes as the silence between us lingers. I glance past the crown prince, hoping for a savior, one savior in particular but he is nowhere to be seen. Then my gaze returns to the prince continuing to lean against the wall.

Most would assume Prince Baylor to be taking a much needed break from the chaos of the ball. However, the moment he smiles at me, I know he was waiting. Whether he was watching or another was, I do not know, but it has resulted in my being alone with a member of the royal family, something that was suggested I avoid, something I wanted to avoid myself.

A lump forms in my throat but I bow politely, hoping that I may pass after acknowledging his presence, "Your Highness."

Prince Baylor smirks. "Nice to see you again, Wallie."

And I guess I will not be passing. Damn it.

"It is an honor that you remember me, Your Highness."

"Oh, I'm sure it is." There's sarcasm dripping from his every word. "I admit I'm a tad shocked Soran let you leave unattended."

Soran? I don't think either are on a first name basis. Although during their last meeting they spoke to one another with their proper titles, it seems

Prince Baylor doesn't do so when Lord Makai isn't around. That pisses me off, but I try my best to keep on a courteous smile.

"There is no reason for the lord to attend to his butler. Besides, Lord Makai is busy conversing with his fellow lords and ladies. It is unlikely he has even noticed my absence."

"I highly doubt that."

Prince Baylor's sudden steps beat against the inside of my skull until my whole body vibrates. Then he's standing in front of me, as close as the day we met with a smile that fools all. In the back of my mind, even I'm tempted to believe the prince means no harm but it's only because I know better that my instincts continue to scream, run.

"Why don't we have a little chat, Wallie?" He asks.

A question it may sound like, but it certainly is not nor is it a request. This is an order, one he doesn't have to repeat. Prince Baylor gestures to an open door on my left leading to a small office.

"Do not worry. I will inform Soran that you were held up," he says, pressing his hand to my shoulder.

I pull away on instinct, my eyes widening with fear when Prince Baylor chuckles.

"Come along." He steps into the office, shutting the door behind me.

I think my legs are about to give out.

He gestures to the seating area. "Have a seat."

There is a small couch and an armchair facing a fireplace. Prince Baylor took the arm chair so I sit on the far end of the couch. He makes no mention of the distance.

"What is it you wish to speak with me about, Your Highness?" I ask, proud for not stuttering out every word. My heart is hammering so loud I fear I

may not hear his answer.

"I am sure you can take a guess."

Yeah, but I do not take a guess.

"You know Lord Movell, do you not?"

I nod. "Yes, he has visited the estate."

"And offered you payment for your services."

Now I'm glad we're sitting. I fear I would have dropped had I been standing.

"Which you understandably declined, as others have claimed the same before you. However, based on what I've heard, Soran has some semblance of trust with you and you to him." Prince Baylor is smiling but the room is ice cold.

He's waiting for me to speak but I don't know what to say. The longer I'm here, the more frightened I become. What is it that he wants me to say? What is he getting out of asking? By not answering, am I making my situation better or worse? I'm at a loss.

"Wh-what are you saying?" I ask, clutching my pants in hopes to keep my hands from shaking.

"I'm not saying anything, but I am curious. What are you hiding?"

"I'm not—"

"Lying won't help. You know there are spies within the Makai estate and they have their eyes on more than just Soran."

My mouth goes dry. How much has been seen? The times we've joked together, the times we've appeared friendly with one another, how much does Prince Baylor know? And how does he know? These spies, Lord Makai has an idea of them so he must have his own precautions in place. Is

the prince tricking me then? Is this a lie to see how I'll react? I'm getting a headache from all this drama.

"Then again, it may be exactly as you said and you declined due to fear," says the prince. "Perhaps you're not as infatuated with the vampire as I've been lead to believe."

Once again, my cheeks are warm. I hate myself for reacting because that reaction doesn't go unnoticed. Prince Baylor's sly smirking is very telling, his tone even more so when he asks, "Tell me, what do you think of your lord? After meeting the two of you the other day, I almost thought the atmosphere to be romantic in nature. Was it?"

I'm supposed to respond but I'm too frightened to do so.

"Could it be that you are actually infatuated with the cursed bastard?"

And I hate that my brows furrow with frustration. I'm only digging myself a bigger hole.

"This is truly interesting." Prince Baylor laughs; the sound cold and distant. He leans back, legs crossed and hands folded comfortably in his lap.

"Whatever it is you are trying to imply, it isn't true, Your Highness. I am nothing more than a butler, one that His Grace does show trust in, I can admit that. It is only because I've proven my worth," I manage to force out, hoping that the fear can't be heard in my voice.

"If that is true, there should be no issue proving it."

I raise a brow.

"Accept this offer, Wallie, and I'll believe you." Prince Baylor reaches into his jacket pocket. He tosses a thick white envelope into my lap, gesturing for me to open it. When I do, I find a wad of cash that is more than I'll probably make in a year. It is double, if not triple what Lord Movell offered me prior.

"Continue getting special treatment from Soran. Continue to earn his trust, do as I order and you will receive that every month for the rest of your life."

My hands shake when I ask, "And if I say no?"

"Then I'll know that you have lied so, what is your answer?"

He already knows that I lied; this is a test. Regardless of my answer, I'll be watched and the truth will be discovered. I don't need time to think of a response.

My hands are shaking when I slide the envelope across the coffee table without a word.

"How loyal you are, Wallie," says Prince Baylor when he suddenly stands.

My gaze follows the predator stalking around the back of the couch until he's standing directly behind me. There's enough time to blink before cold steel rests against my neck. Pressing the dagger beneath my chin, Prince Baylor forces me to peer up at his cold expression.

There's that belief that your life flashes before your eyes moments before death. I think I'm seeing that now, imagining my mother's face, the sound of her voice and trying desperately to do the same for my father. Thinking of Soran, wondering if he'd miss me should I leave and asking myself if I can take a chance to run.

But there's no time to really do anything other than panic as the blade is ripped back to tear at my skin in seconds.

✝✝✝

Well hi there :D What a nice cliff hanger, isn't it? ^^ Oh dear, oh my, whatever could happen next~ I ain't even gonna ask more questions this time heheheheheheheheh

✝Thirty-Six✝

There's shock. There's fear. I feel blood against my fingertips but soon realize the cut is not lethal nor all that threatening. It sure as hell stings though, and startles me enough to fall off the couch when attempting to run away. My elbow slams against the coffee table, knocking it back as I hit the floor.

Prince Baylor is amused when he whispers, "Let's see if that loyalty is mutual."

That amusement turns into pure joy only moments later when the door bursts open, a gust of foul wind filling the room. The candlelight and flames of the fire are snuffed out, leaving the room in a dim light from the hallway. That light illuminates Lord Makai's looming figure in the doorway, eyes a familiar searing red that only worsens upon seeing the situation at hand. There's almost a purple tint to his veins that are seen through his skin, like an electric pulse running through him that slowly diminishes.

"Lord Makai, is something troubling you?" asks Prince Baylor so innocently that, had I been a passerby, I'd truly believe he had no idea what was going on.

There is no response verbal response from Lord Makai. His focus is on me.

I turn away in shame, although I'm not entirely sure what I'm ashamed of. My feelings? Those feelings being caught? I haven't the answer so I merely stand on shaking legs and press my hand to the still stinging cut. There's little blood but I feel it slip through my fingers.

"Wallace, come here," says Lord Makai. His voice is shaking but I'd take that shaking rage over Prince Baylor's charming smile any day of the year.

I'm hiding behind Lord Makai in an instant, head down as the two converse.

"It seems I've been lenient with you for far too long, Cathen. You will regret this transgression, I assure you," Lord Makai growls animalistically. The familiar sensation of cold dread consumes the room as the darkness grows, pulsating from Lord Makai's form.

"No need to assure me. I'm confident you'll return this favor in kind." Prince Baylor leans to the left in order to peer around Lord Makai. He smiles when our eyes meet. "I only wished to have a chat. The cut was merely an accident."

"Do not lie to me."

"I would never, isn't that right, Wallie?"

I'm not sure if Prince Baylor expected me not to answer, but now that Lord Makai is here I feel safe enough to respond, "He definitely cut me on purpose."

Prince Baylor chuckles, pressing his hand to his stomach when he says, "Earlier you could barely stand out of fear. You're so ballsy now that your Prince Charming has arrived." He shrugs his shoulders once more, returning the dagger to it's sheath located beneath his golden cloak. "I've got what I wanted though. I promise not to bother either of you for the rest of the evening."

"I'm certain you won't seeing as we are leaving." Lord Makai turns, hesitantly pressing his hand to my back to usher me out of the room.

"But the party has only just begun!" cries Prince Baylor teasingly. "While you're here Wallie, why don't you ask Lord Makai to show you to his old room? He spent so much of his youth there, I'm sure it would be of great interest to you!"

Old room?

I hesitate at the mention of such a thing, peering into the office where Prince Baylor is smiling smugly. There seems to be yet another mystery tacked onto Lord Makai's past. I shouldn't be surprised. By now you'd think

I'd have put some answers together but I haven't. The mysterious closed off rooms, the girl in the painting, an old room at the palace although history books claim Lord Makai went straight to the estate after Emperor Elyon's death; one unknown stacked atop another.

If Prince Baylor had more to say though, he's silenced by a sudden gust of wind from Lord Makai's outstretched hand. A golden light forms around Prince Baylor's figure in the shape of a protective shield but it does not completely save him. The wind is so powerful it knocks Prince Baylor off his feet and out the window with a loud smash.

My jaw drops when I hear the splash of water outside followed by Prince Baylor screaming, "Damn it, Soran!"

Lord Makai grabs my arm, rushing both of us to the carriage outside where Layne is already waiting. He doesn't even have time to acknowledge either of us before we're inside. Layne swiftly follows and the carriage lurches forward after Lord Makai's barked order.

Layne eyes my neck. His eyes harden with concern that he does not voice. I give him a smile in hopes to ease him. With Lord Makai's stiff nature and ferocious glare, it doesn't really work. Although the rage seeping from his rigid form is not directed at either of us, the atmosphere is still uncomfortable.

With Layne's presence, I'm uncertain what or if I should mention what happened earlier so, once more, our return home is silent. My thoughts are not, and it's sad to think how that's such a common occurrence.

But upon returning to the estate, rather than retiring to my room for the evening I'm shocked to hear Lord Makai say, "Wallace, come with me."

"H-Huh?"

He does not repeat himself, only ascends the stairs. Layne shouts that he will retrieve medicine for my wound as I rush to follow Lord Makai up the steps. He orders me to take a seat in his office where I wait patiently for Layne to return. Layne is the one tending to my wound while Lord Makai

waits (mopes) on the balcony. The winter air drifts in through the slightly parted doors. Goosebumps form on my skin. Layne shivers. Neither of us say anything.

"Are you in need of anything else, Your Grace?" asks Layne after finishing with the bandage.

Lord Makai shakes his head. "No, you may leave." When I go to stand, Lord Makai swiftly says, "Not you, Wallace. Stay."

Layne gives me a curious glance over his shoulder once at the door. I shrug, but even after Layne leaves, the room is silent. I'm uncertain why I've been told to stay. Does he wish to discuss what happened? There isn't much to say, and honestly I don't wish to upset him more. Based on his rigid shoulders, he's uncomfortable enough.

"Why did you follow him?" asks Lord Makai. His question stumps me.

"Huh?"

"Cathen."

"Ah...follow him into the office you mean?"

Lord Makai nods. He remains on the balcony, arms crossed and back to me. Snow flurries fall from the dark sky, covering his shoulders and the railing of the terrace.

"He is the crown prince. I am in no position to say no," I answer honestly, leaning against the arm of the couch while watching Lord Makai's every move. My response must bother him. From here I catch a glimpse of his fingers digging into his arm.

"You have every right to say no," he argues.

"I'm not like you, Your Grace. I have no standing with them."

"But you have standing with me."

Lord Makai faces me, brows furrowed with a concern I've never seen before. That concern burrows itself into my gut, full of warmth that is both frightening and addictive.

"I'll handle them," he says, turning away once more. "Whatever they try to do, and whatever you must do to spare yourself, I'll handle the consequences."

When he says such things it gives me hope; hope for my ever growing feelings to be mutual. Maybe part of me suspects that to be the case, but another is pessimistic and bitterly realistic. I don't want to get my hopes up, but he continuously gives me reason to.

I push myself off the couch to join Lord Makai out on the balcony. The air is freezing.

"I'm sorry," I say, tugging on the back of his sleeve almost childishly. "It won't happen again. Next time, I'll return to you immediately."

He doesn't respond. My hand rests comfortably on his arm. He doesn't pull away. My heart decides then to flutter.

"Were you worried?" I ask, feeling him immediately tense beneath his jacket. "Did you think he had done much worse?"

Lord Makai knocks my hand away with a roll of his shoulders. I catch a brief glimpse of his solemn eyes before he steps back inside.

"Get some rest, Wallace. You had a long night."

This is where I'm meant to obey without question, but my mind and body are incapable of constant coordination.

My hand reaches out without my mind's consent, grasping Lord Makai's hand that is as cold the winter snow beneath our feet. He freezes, hand completely limp in my grasp. His eyes are wide, so awestruck that he probably isn't aware of his own expression, jaw slightly ajar and eyes blinking rapidly in confusion. He isn't looking at me, only at the connection

between us, like it's something he has never seen before, or at least not in a very long time.

I should let go. I'm definitely freaking out because—holy shit—I'm holding his hand. I'm holding my boss' hand. This definitely isn't proper nor is it a good idea. Yet even while thinking this, I don't let go. I don't want to let go. The tip of my fingers are tingling with uncontrollable warmth that they are desperate to keep. My mouth is trying to work but so far only a puff of air escapes my dry lips.

"Uh..." I hum, flushing furiously when Lord Makai's eyes slowly drag themselves up my arm before connecting with my own gaze. All I hear is the furious thumping of my heart followed by a hard swallow.

"Uh, I...I just wanted to say—"

What did I want to say? I forget.

"R-Regardless of how tonight turned out, uh, t-thank you for the suit. Thank you for the pocket watch and-and your apology and for taking me to the palace. Thank you for getting me out of there, for caring, for being concerned and, just...thank you, Soran."

My cheeks are on fire, now more than ever. The cold night can be used as an excuse, but there is no excuse for Lord Makai. Whether I, or he, wants to admit it or not, his cheeks are definitely tinted a light pink and his hand grows tense. There's the briefest moment where I think maybe, just maybe, this is a turning point. It's the way he's looking at me, almost desperately, not that I'm any better.

But the moment fades.

His eyes harden when he rips his hand away, nodding only once before rushing back inside. He nearly clips his shoulder on the door when he does, leaving me alone on the patio, still hopeful and very confused. I swear I can still feel Lord Makai's hand in mine. And my heart won't quiet. It hums and jumps and beats as fast as a hummingbird flies. Although it's freezing

outside, I think I'm on fire. There's heat from the tip of my toes to the top of my head.

There is no denying it, even if I want to and even if it'd be better for the both of us; I like Lord Makai.

No, I like Soran.

I like him a lot.

✝✝✝

Aren't I the best for giving an early update? And such a cute one too! You're welcome~ lol So Wallie is fine, a blushing fool, but fine! Cathen has added another secret to Soran's past, what do you think he meant by Soran's "old room"? How do you feel about Soran's reactions this chapter; insisting that he'll stand up for Wallie and the blushing, of course? ;D And now Wallie can no longer deny that he likes Soran, but will Soran ever openly return those feelings?

Oh, if you're reading He Who Will Be King, it was updated yesterday instead of today so check it out! If you aren't reading it then you totally should lol

✝Thirty-Seven✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Soran can't remember the last time he had a good night's rest. Often nights are loud; louder than many would believe. The chirping of crickets are as boisterous as an orchestra and wind blowing through trees as powerful as a typhoon. As a child Soran struggled to tune out the constant noise. As an adult, he learned to cope.

However, when the world is silent, his thoughts slither in.

A constant stream of thoughts keep Soran awake most nights. And most nights such thoughts are anger inducing. Had he been born human, he would have died in his thirties simply from the rage that always boiled at the rim of a great cauldron (then again, it is unlikely he'd have the same anger as he does now).

But this evening, for the first time in a long time, it is not anger or frustration that keeps Soran awake. It is something else entirely.

A feeling of butterflies in his stomach, electric at his fingertips, a loss of breath and the constant need to toss and turn because every part of the bed feels too warm. Then he realized it isn't the bed but himself that is searing hot so he kicks off the blankets. Even the cold air can't cool his skin that simmers with a constant flush.

Soran's breath is deep, followed with a long sigh that shutters behind his lips. He sits up, staring at his open palm. His fingers flex, recalling the sensation of Wallie's warm hand encasing his. Warm. Unbelievably warm. As much as Soran tries to tell himself it's because he's cold as ice, he cannot deny the truth.

Wallie. It all has to do with Wallie; his soft touch, kind words, sapphire eyes and pink cheeks, all of it is warm and keeping Soran awake. Awake and yearning for the simplicity that others have; how that moment likely would

have been so much more if he were someone different. Where would it have gone? Where would *they* have gone?

Soran can only assume the answers for a relationship such as that, such as the one he's yearning for, is one he has never known and will never know.

But still, every time Soran closes his eyes he sees Wallie then wishes to *actually* see him.

When Soran glances beside him, he imagines Wallie laying there. His curled white hair brushes over long eyelashes, chest rising slowly with every breath passing through parted lips. Soran reaches out like he honestly thinks he can touch him, only for the image to fade when his hand presses against the silk sheets.

The sense of longing is not foreign to Soran, only something he tries desperately to forget or ignore. Hoping to see someone. Longing to be with them. Missing them. Yes, Soran knows those feelings well; so well that he pierces his bottom lip from how hard he suddenly bit. The taste of blood fills his mouth followed by him wiping it away with the back of his hand.

"Don't be a fool," Soran whispers, slapping his own chest like he expects it to stop the fluttering of his heart. His nails press crescent shapes into his skin. There's a pain never seen but always there, a deep wound that will never heal, but Soran's heart wishes to forget. It wishes to pretend like such pain never happened.

"Please, don't be a fool."

But being a fool is exactly what Soran's heart wants for it only quickens at the mere thought of Wallie. The thought of seeing him again tomorrow, wishing desperately to speak with him, to feel his hand and—

Soran jumps out of bed because the only way to stop the emotions bubbling within is to give a harsh reminder as to why they can never be. Even ignoring the absolute obvious; Wallie is human and thus they could never be, there are far more pressing reasons.

There are secrets, so much so that Soran himself likely cannot voice them all. Audacities committed by his own hands, ones that he regrets and ones that he still relishes in even when knowing they were wrong. Then there was pain, painful secrets that were locked away, both metaphorically and physically.

The off limit rooms contain only a few of those painful locked away secrets; one of which Wallie managed to sneak a peek of. It is the first that Soran visits.

When the door swings open, the butterflies begin to fade. The room is clean since Soran cannot handle the idea of it, or any of the rooms, rotting away. As ridiculous as it is, he likes to think of them as a memorial of sorts. Something that will always be there, same as the guilt that continuously eats away at him to the point of madness.

For a long while, Soran would apologize. He would sit outside the door, desperately trying to drink away the pain but it never worked. Alcohol did nothing. Nor did drugs. Soran could never escape, not the way humans did. He would beg and plead for their forgiveness outside an empty room and a closed door, but was only ever met with silence. A deafening silence.

Soran shuts the door only to turn to the next locked off room; a bedroom as bright and beautiful as a summer morning. There are seemingly endless dresses in the closet and yellow pillows, fluffy and warm on the green couch. Fields of sunflowers are painted across the walls with white drapes over a large bed. Atop a white vanity in the far corner are bedazzled headbands and sparkling necklaces along with a half finished flower crown. The leftover plastic flowers are sitting there as if it is waiting to be finished.

Soran knows they never will be.

The next room is less a summer morning and more a fall evening with soft and neutral colors of brown and red leather. Rather than summer dresses there are vests and fitted pants along with leather boots, scuffed and well worn. Two arm chairs sit before a brick fireplace where a sword rests atop the mantle, small in size but well kept and adored. There is no vanity but there's a desk littered with books and scattered papers of history and

mathematics. A quill rests in a bottle of ink, waiting to continue the unfinished letter that will forever remain unfinished.

Soran blinks away the tears. He can hardly breathe from the memories and the guilt. A few words spoken with one long dead comes to mind.

"I will protect them with my life if I must."

"And I will make sure you never have to."

Soran's heart aches with a sorrow that never truly leaves.

The door closes with Soran's heavy footsteps and even heavier thoughts leading to the next. Soft sobs are replaced with heavy anger. That anger flushes away any warmth only to be replaced with a burning frustration that rips through his gut when he opens the last door.

Soran's hand drops listlessly to his side. The weight of guilt is crushing as he brushes by the sitting area with two deep violet couches facing each other. Both are filled with stuffed animals of every color. They are having a tea party, the gorgeous porcelain tea set sits atop the white table between them. On the ceiling are countless silver stars that reflect the soft moonlight trickling in from the wide windows. A daybed with a purple canopy is pressed against a window with an assortment of toys littering both the bed and the floor.

For a moment, Soran swears he sees a young girl curled atop the white blankets with a familiar brown teddy bear in her grasp. He reaches out.

The vision is gone in the blink of an eye, taking the breath from his lungs with it. He drops into the plush purple chair next to the bed, the one he once sat in every night. If he listens hard enough, he hears the laughter of children, soft songs of flowers and boyish banter from across the hall.

Soran's fingers dig into the arms of the chair, cling to them like he believes if he waits long enough she'll reappear.

She never does.

"You know better. You know what happens," says Soran, reaching for a storybook resting on the white bookshelf next to the chair.

There are endless stories but one book is more worn out than the others. The spine is slightly cracked and pages a little faded from being read time and time again. Soran need not open it to even recall the tales within, to this day he has them memorized.

Still, Soran opens the cover to find his own writing staring back at him.

"To our princess, Annalee,
I know you are unhappy about my going away, but I promise it will only be for a short while.
Do not be sad. Do not worry. I will be alright.
But should you be sad and should you worry, read this book and think of me. I promise I will read them all to you when I return.
I love you, and I will love you until the end of time. You know that I will.
Love,
Uncle Soran"

A single tear hits the page, cascading over the old ink before Soran wipes it away with the back of his thumb. He flips through the pages, peering at drawings and wondering how often Annalee read the tales while he was gone. And though she is not there to hear him, Soran opens to the first tale to read it off in a voice laced with sorrow. Still he tries to change his tone for every character, exaggerated and humorous because all he wished for was to hear the children laugh.

There is no laughter, only Soran's voice and the crickets and the wind.

Soran returns the book to the shelf, throwing his head over the back of the chair. When his eyes close, it is no longer Wallie he sees. It's red, an endless red and the smell of blood that stings his nostrils. The room darkens, a frost clings to the windows then crystallizes until it is a sheen of white. Books vibrate atop shelves. The windows rattle. The drapes sway and the teacups clatter. There's a taste and smell of death permeating from Soran's figure that hums with a ghostly red static.

Then it stops after Soran snarls and quickly stands. The darkness fades when he steps into the doorway, glancing back in hopes to see any of them but, as always, the room is empty.

The disappointment never lessens.

When the door shuts, the butterflies are gone and only rage remains.

✝✝✝

Now this was a huuuuuge chapter because we've seen a lot into Soran's past. There are a total of four closed off rooms, each seeming to belong to different people and the last of which belonging to the youngest girl, Annalee, and now we know their relation! But Soran's own siblings were killed by his father so how could this come to be? Are they actually related? What else is there to this story and these mysterious people? What actually happened them? And will Wallie ever discover the truth?

P.S. He Who Will Be King is officially completed today. If you've yet to check it out then you can start binge reading now, and if you've been waiting or are caught up then, well, there's a finale now so you can finish up. Thank you so much, I hope you enjoy!

✝Thirty-Eight✝

Wallie P.O.V.

I have a problem; one that cannot be solved easily with avoidance or even playing pretend.

I like Soran. Not Lord Makai, the so called evil vampire that rules over his estate with an iron fist. No, I like Soran; the sometimes moody, sometimes a little evil, but sometimes funny and kind and considerate and sweet man that happens to be a lord. Happens to be my lord, which only worsens the situation.

Thinking I may like Soran and knowing I like him are two completely different animals. One has the possibility of easily ignoring and moving on. The other cannot be ignored even when I try because just seeing Soran—shit, I mean—Lord Makai, makes my heart do "the flutter."

You know, when your heart forgets that it's primary function is to pump blood because it's too busy focusing on every little thing the person you like does then it does the le skippity skip?

Like how Soran blinks rapidly when something confuses or baffles him; somehow my heart screams, *that's fucking adorable!*

Or how he sits when bored, head tilted and resting atop his hand with half mast eyes, like he's doing everything he can not to fall asleep. But he never yawns, only wiggles his nose or taps his fingers, neither of which I think he's aware that he does yet, again, my heart goes, *ding, ding, ding, he's doing the thing! Isn't it great?!*

No, it's not great. Stop it!

Or when he sits for too long then waits until he believes no one is watching before stretching his arms high above his head, turning his wrists this way and that while his eyes squint into smiles. Then he reverts back to serious

mode like nothing even happened and, oh boy, the flutter could put out a wildfire (or make it worse) when he does that.

And how weird is it that I'm noticing all this? Have I become some sort of obsessive freak? Or, let's be honest, am I waiting and hoping for a sign that these feelings are mutual? I want them to be. But then I don't want them to be. Confliction, hello, how are you?

So I am eternally grateful (I think) that Layne is at Soran's side far more than I am, even if I've noticed Sor—damn it, Lord Makai!—has put more distance between us. It is clear there is some avoidance going on, which is fine because I am desperately trying to avoid him as well (even if, again, doesn't really help my feelings.)

Seeing him in the hall or tending to him in the office always has my mind going blank. When he looks at me, I remember the light blush under his eyes from a mere nine days ago. Remembering that blush has me blushing, which he has to notice. Sometimes his eyes widen. Sometimes he freezes. But he never says anything, nor do I, and I practically bolt the moment I can in hopes to focus on work, anything other than Lord Makai. Thinking of him is dangerous.

Of course, the journal I'm hiding beneath my mattress doesn't exactly help this situation. At night, when Hael is asleep, I reach for that journal and smile yet somehow scowl at the same time while peering at what's within. There is the usual, what Hael taught me over the last few months, but in the back there are pages of Soran Makai written in my chicken scratch. Bit by bit I am getting better but seeing it makes my face warm.

I bury said face in the journal, groaning against the pages then holding them out to admire. My writing is truly awful, although now it's at least legible. If Lord Makai saw this he'd tease me for sure, say something snarky but smile while doing so.

I bite my lip to hold back my own grin. There my heart goes again, thumping wildly at the thought of him then aching upon remembering how little I've seen him of late.

"Stop it, Wallie," I whisper, putting the journal back. I curl up in the covers with my back facing Hael.

"You can't be like this. It's hopeless and..." I sigh heavily. "And dangerous."

Yet somehow the danger is always the last thing on my mind even if that is by far the most concerning. With Cathen breathing down our backs, there's a high probability that I may be the next servant convulsing on the floor. If Soran does show even the least bit of interest, there's no doubt in my mind that my life will be on the line—if it isn't already.

And if that is the case, let's say there is a one in a million chance these feelings are mutual, I...I don't want to bring that sort of pain to Soran. He carries enough already.

...fuck, I called him Soran again. This is really bad.

When my stomach decides to growl angrily, I know that sleep is not taking me anytime soon. Suppose I can grab a snack to eat away my feelings. Maybe that will help at least put me into a food coma for the evening.

With candle in hand, I quietly exit the room to tiptoe through the halls. Others are likely asleep and while there are no rules against midnight snacks, I fear waking Higra. She will likely gnaw my arm off for messing with her sleep so I am extra quiet when passing her room to get to the stairs.

The kitchen is on the first floor. I grab myself some leftover cookies as well as a few slices of bread to slather with butter. One hangs in my mouth when I exit the kitchen. I'm munching on it when a woman's voice carries through the halls from the foyer at the other end of the hall.

"There isn't meant to be anyone here?" I whisper, each word muffled by the bread.

Curious, I tiptoe once more towards the foyer at the opposite end so that the woman's voice becomes clearer and clearer.

"I'm truly heart broken, Your Grace. After so long, I was beginning to suspect you have forgotten me so when I received your summons I was ecstatic." The stranger speaks with a thick accent that I don't recognize. Every word is flirtatious in nature.

"I'm sure you were, after all, the loss of such a valuable customer would surely harm your business," Lord Makai responds, sounding neither annoyed nor joyous.

Ah, so she's a guest? But we weren't informed of any arriving earlier today...

I'm curious who this woman may be and what they speak of so late in the night. My footsteps are as quiet as a mouse. I even crouch when peering into the foyer from around the wall. Lord Makai is standing atop the stairs with a stranger, although one can easily guess who she is and what she is here for based on her attire.

Her cherry pink hair rests in long curls to her waist and bright green eyes lined with a smoky black eyeshadow. Her lips are full and lush, as red as Lord Makai's eyes while her form fitted clothes show off every curve. The dress hugs her thin waist and does not leave room to the imagination. Every step she takes is a soft click of the heels that are seen from the long slit, running from her hip all the way down her dress.

No aristocrat would be caught dead in such revealing attire. Therefore, she is the "two in one deal" that Janein spoke of.

My stomach drops.

I know that it shouldn't because I've known this for a while. However, seeing them together hurts more than I am willing to admit. And when the stranger brushes back the hair from her shoulders, there is a very telling mark, indentations in her neck with slight bruising. A mark that Lord Makai has clearly left.

My back presses against the wall. I slip to the floor, only hurting myself more by listening.

✝✝✝

If any of y'all are rude or say mean shit about the sex worker coming to do the job she was hired to do simply because she's a woman and thus a threat to the "ship," I will school the fuck out of you. Respect her. Do not be a piece of shit, I will not allow it. Also, Soran is an adult with complete ownership over his body. Wallie does not own him. He's allowed to sleep with her if he wants so don't even try it. Y'all have been warned.

Wallie can't deny his feelings for Soran even a little! And him continuously thinking of him as Soran is adorable, although I'm a bit biased ;D Our poor Wallie, you best run back to your room little one >.< How do you think things will proceed? When will our boys ever stop avoiding each other?

✝Thirty-Nine✝

"This is more than just business though," says the woman. "I rather enjoy your company, Your Grace."

"You need not try to flatter me, Audria. I am not an unhappily married man looking for a woman to inflict my frustrations on."

"And that is why this is not flattery. You're an honest man of simple needs, which is why I will happily service you more than I would others, in fact, I look forward to it."

I need to leave.

"But tonight you're having me leave so soon," she suddenly says with a heavy sigh. "After a mere drink? That's unlike you. Tell me, have I been replaced? Whoever they are must be an absolute dream."

Huh? A mere drink? So they didn't...?

Wait, wait, no! It's not my business. Who cares?! (Asks the boy that is eavesdropping, which implies that he very much cares. Damn it.)

My cheeks warm. My heart skips with every breath.

"Audria."

"What? Can the woman you've been sleeping with for nearly a decade not ask?" Audria giggles. She doesn't sound offended, more teasing if anything. "Fine, fine, I will take my leave."

"Please do." Soran doesn't sound all that angrily, more like just as teasing as she was.

I crawl to a door leading to a lounge like the freaking loser that I am. One could easily see me from the foyer so hiding is a must. Leaving should have

been the actual must. What the hell am I doing? Am I a kid?! Why are you like this, Wallie?!

"Remember to summon me should you be in need of assistance again, Your Grace." The front doors open. "Have a good evening then."

Lord Makai hums in response. The door closes followed by the huffs and stomping steps of horses outside. My hands are shaking slightly and I'm not sure if I'm happy or feeling like absolute shit for eavesdropping. What the hell am I doing?

"It's none of your business anyways," I whisper after minutes pass. She is gone. Lord Makai must be too so I take that chance to step into the hall. "It's his life and—"

And I'm screwed because every word has been heard as I soon discover when I happen to take one last glance at the foyer.

Lord Makai is there.

His arms are crossed, gaze fixated on me, obviously aware that I was hiding during their conversation, or at least a part of it. However, he doesn't look angry. If anything, he appears troubled and that makes my throat run dry. Or maybe it's being caught or maybe it's only his attention, who knows at this point. The only thing for certain is that I'm caught and I've forgotten how to breathe.

"What are you doing, Wallace?" He asks. His tone isn't very telling either.

"Uh...I was just..." I hold up the half eaten piece of bread then shove it into my mouth like a complete idiot. At least that gets Soran to smile; soft and lasting a mere moment until it's gone.

"And eavesdropping," he adds.

I puff out my cheeks, unable to bite my lip since I'm midchew. Soran raises a brow, like he expects me to respond but I don't. I chew slowly as an excuse to keep quiet. He shakes his head.

"Go to sleep, Wallie," he says, turning away without another word.

My heart reminds me of how absolutely screwed I am because it chooses to cling to my name.

Wallie. He said Wallie. He rarely calls me Wallie, but when he does my heart doesn't just do the le skippity skip—it full on loses it with an explosive fire that could rival the sun.

"W-Who was that?" I blurt out causing Lord Makai to stop midstep. He glances back at me. "We...we weren't informed of a guest today," I mumble, averting my gaze with a blush. I can feel my face heating up by the second.

"You heard us. I am sure you can make an educated guess."

Yes, yes I can. I don't know why I'm asking. Am I expecting him to say anything different?

"But you said it yourself," says Lord Makai. "It's none of your business anyways."

I bite my lip. "R-Right...yeah, it isn't. My apologies, Your Grace."

Lord Makai says nothing more. When he turns away, I raise my head to watch his retreating figure. There's a sorrow in my gut, which only hurts even more upon seeing that he isn't standing as tall as he usually does. I hate it, and now my mouth is even less likely to listen to my brain.

"G-Good night!" I holler, flushing when Lord Makai freezes at the top of the stairs. For a brief moment, he peers back at me, eyes warm and bright. But he says nothing after turning away, only nodding before disappearing down the hall.

It isn't until his door closes once more that I take a breath. My lungs hurt, so does my heart, and so I glare at what caused this mess in the first place; my stomach.

"Really? The one time I sneak out to get a snack and I see this? Why are you against me?" My stomach actually growls back so I shove the other

piece of bread in my mouth.

Stupid, stupid! I shouldn't have looked. This is why curiosity killed the cat. Even if my curiosity has been satisfied, I think I used up one of my nine lives, or all of them, because damn that was rough! Or maybe not? I mean, they didn't sleep—

I smack myself in the head. "Stop it," I hiss. "It doesn't matter if they—"

Then I throw my hand over my mouth because I am remembering how I was so easily caught. Lord Makai has the hearing of a fox. I can't even whisper to myself! Ok then, stop it Wallie. It doesn't matter if they slept together. It is none of your business and Lord Makai is a grown ass man (more than grown, he's an ancient vampire) so he has every right to have sex and—

And...I can't even mention Lord Makai and sex in the same sentence without my face going red. Damn, ok, I really need to get some sleep. I am going back to bed and pretending this never happened!

If only my heart would listen though.

As I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, all my heart does is beat so loud that it's all I hear. A constant thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump, until I have the rhythm memorized. And it only grows worse when my memories decide to bring up Soran's room. His husky voice in the early morning and his pale skin and his toned chest and short unkempt hair and—

I grab the pillow from behind my head and fucking smother myself with it until Hael's half asleep, but still concerned, voice asks, "Wallie, what the hell are you doing?"

"Dying."

"Can you do that in the morning? I'm trying to sleep."

So am I, but nothing I do will take away these feelings. They are growing worse by the day. I drag the pillow off my face to rest on my chest. "Hael."

"Hmm?"

"I'm about to get emotional with you so if that ain't your style, you can just fall back to sleep."

Hael chuckles. "I may do so because I'm tired, but go on."

"Have you ever liked someone you shouldn't?"

Hael's bed squeaks. I'm assuming he has moved to face me but I refuse to check.

"What do you mean?" He asks around a long yawn.

"You know, just...someone you shouldn't like."

"If you're both consenting adults, why shouldn't you like them? Are they already in a relationship? Because if that's the case, and they like you back, it probably means they should be out of their relationship or talking to their partner about it."

I shake my head. "No, no, it isn't like that."

"Mm then I'm not sure what you mean. If you like this person then you like them. I don't really think there's a "shouldn't" involved."

"And if they like me back?"

"Then you date."

"What if it isn't that simple?" I ask, finally facing Hael. He's on his stomach, cheek pressed to the pillow with his eyes barely open.

While rubbing at said barely open eyes, Hael simply says, "Love is never simple. That's what makes it love."

My breath catches in my throat.

"I don't know the answers, Wallie," says Hael. "But I can say that love is never a feeling you shouldn't have. Regardless of how it turns out for you, it's nice to have had that love, don't you think?" Hael suddenly turns on his side, away from me. "Go back to sleep. Think about it tomorrow because staying up certainly won't help."

"Y-Yeah, you're right." I return the pillow behind my head, which actually seems to have quieted. Smiling, I look to Hael's back and say, "Thanks."

Only his snores answer me.

I chuckle and turn away, still uncertain about these feelings but Hael is right. Regardless of the outcome, this is a feeling that is nice to have.

✝✝✝

Here's an early update since it's Valentine's Day lol But there you go, Soran didn't sleep with her, but just a reminder that he can cause he's his own person. But at least they talked a little this chapter, a very little but it's progress lol And Hael has managed to lift Wallie's spirits, yay! But these two still have quite a lot of work to do before they can hopefully get together, huh?

P.S. I posted a new story called, "—K." It will not be a colossal monster like HWWBK or this. It's more a traditional YA novel, also it'll be updated every four days cause I actually already completed it and am posting on patreon as I edit lol Check it out? ^^

✝Forty✝

With the passing of The Day of Aberia, winter is coming to an end. The once frigid air has warmed enough to wear no more than a light jacket. Snowfall has lessened until there is but a thin sprinkling of white across the yard. Gray clouds that consumed the sky for months are finally lessening. Spots of familiar light blue peek through fluffy clouds and the sun warms the earth.

The trees are bare and solemn, waiting for the life that spring will bring in a few weeks time. The ice has cracked atop the pond, swaying from side to side with every gust of a cool wind. The fires within the estate have lessened as some have been sweating in the night. There's talk of spring and flowers and more visits into town among the servers. But there is also more work to be done. Soon the yard of House Makai will have to be tended to once more. We are to prepare for when that happens.

I am one that is helping to prepare, waiting patiently at the front doors with Higra and Enith, a fellow butler, for our guests to arrive. Higra informed me earlier that a landscaping company in town will be stopping by the next few days to inspect the yard. Every year Lord Makai does something a little different with the gardens or the hedges, a change of scenery I guess? So the landscapers come in, make up plans, get it cleared with Lord Makai then get to work once the weather is nice.

Why I'm helping is beyond me. Layne has been poking fun that Higra plans to retire soon and is preparing me to take her position, which had me cracking up. There's no way in hell, especially seeing as I haven't even been here a year. However, I am of the belief that she trusts me and because of that she gives me more tasks. How is that fair? But whatever, I am flattered seeing as Higra is not easily impressed.

I sniffle and rub at my reddening nose just as the landscapers come into view.

The pathway to the estate is almost eerie without the foliage of spring or snow of winter. There is an entrapping aspect to it with trees lining the long road. Limbs reach over to form a canopy and block the sun, creating sharp shadows and sudden cuts of light. It gives me the shivers while I watch the landscapers hop off their cart.

There are four in total, three men and one woman. The woman speaking with Higra smiles, already following her around back while shouting for two of the men to take notes of the front. There is clearly a system here as they know exactly what they're doing. Enith joins the two in front while Higra gestures for me to follow. I do exactly that, tagging along behind her and the two landscapers.

The woman has a notepad out that she's scribbling in as Higra speaks while the man is hesitating every now and again to write something for himself. I am not entirely sure why I am needed, especially when I haven't even been introduced, until the man asks, "Miss. Higra, may I borrow him for a moment?"

"But of course, Liam, that is why he is here. Wallace, please help Liam with whatever he needs," replies Higra. She walks away without another word, disappearing behind a few dead bushes.

"Wallace, was it?" asks Liam with a smile. I finally get a good look at him when he holds out his hand. "I'm Liam, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too and, please, call me Wallie."

Liam's short brown hair pokes out beneath his black cap. He's likely around my age, maybe a tad older. Certainly a looker, a looker with a charming smile that can easily make any weak at the knees.

"Wallie, are you new?" He asks, leaning down while sketching on the notepad. I notice that he isn't writing anything but instead drawing shapes. I wonder if it's plans on what they wish the garden's design to be.

"Sort of. I've been here since the start of summer so a few months," I answer.

"Ah, I see, was only askin' cause I hadn't seen you last year. I've been coming to work the yard for four years now."

"Really? So it's true, it's different every year?"

Liam nods. "His Grace doesn't have much interest in us, honestly. I'm not all that sure why he bothers, but we're grateful for the work."

I'm not sure why he does it either seeing as he rarely enjoyed the view of the garden during the nice weather. I glance up to the second floor window that leads to Lord Makai's office. For whatever reason, I'm disappointed upon not seeing him on the terrace. Why he would be there is beyond me. I shake my head and try not to focus on how much I want to see him.

Yet another week has passed with little interactions. Neither of us mentioned Audria's visit, we haven't mentioned anything at all to each other. I tell myself it's for the best, but my heart won't listen. It yearns to speak with him even for a moment.

"If you don't mind my asking, and not to be rude, but do you actually need me for anything?" I ask while pointing to myself. "I know nothing about yard work."

"Company policy, more for our protection," answers Liam after he stands. He dusts the dirt and snow from his pants. "It's to ensure that nothing is stolen or broken, but also make sure that we aren't accused of it either."

"Ohhh, I see."

"I know it must not be that fun following me around in the cold. I'll try my best to keep you entertained."

Liam's eyes light up when I chuckle, his smile growing until it reaches his ears.

"Are you from around here?" asks Liam. He's now inspecting an area around the fountain, writing a few notes down then checking on the bushes that remain.

"No, I came to Vashna for work. Got in because my cousin sent out letters of recommendation so it was pure luck."

"Suppose working for an Archduke is lucky."

I chuckle once more, earning a raised brow from Liam.

"Did I say something wrong?" He asks with a nervous smile.

"No, just...most usually make a smart remark about His Grace."

"Don't get me wrong, I would have a few years ago, maybe even last year, but His Grace has been good to us. He scares the hell out of me and I won't say that I trust him, but when it comes to work-" Liam shrugs. "It is what it is."

I wish more felt that way, even if it isn't an ideal situation either. It's better than what Lord Makai typically has to face. I want to roll my eyes that even now I'm thinking of him, defending him. We haven't even talked in a week. It's obvious we're avoiding each other. I really need to pull myself together.

"You like working here then?" Liam asks, breaking me from my thoughts.

"Huh? Oh, well, it's...it's not as bad as others have made me believe," I answer with a sniffle. I rub the my nose with the back of my hand. I rub my hands together to warm them then stuff them in my jacket pocket when I add on, "His Grace can be moody and a tad frustrating, but nothing worth hating him for. Not to the extent that some do."

"You're very level headed, Wallie," says Liam, which has me blushing for some reason. "Lord Makai better give you a raise. Keeping a worker like you around should be top priority."

"I, I uh, I don't know about that." I laugh nervously, rubbing at the back of my neck in embarrassment. My face is growing warm. "I'm just an ok worker...but a raise would be nice."

"A raise is always nice."

We both laugh while I follow after Liam through the garden. Listening to him speak animatedly about his work has me asking, "What made you get into landscaping? I feel like that's a job that there has to be some very specific reason for why you like it."

Liam laughs. "I suppose it is. Not exactly something kids dream about being." Liam gestures over his shoulder towards town. "My mom actually has a flower shop. She was always working in the garden so I joined her. When we went to jobs, like weddings, with our flowers and I saw how amazing everything looked I just thought I'd like to design stuff like that."

"Have you ever done landscaping for a wedding then?"

"Loads! Although it's not as fun as I thought it'd be." Liam leans over to whisper, "Brides are some of the most terrifying people I've ever met."

I throw my head back in laughter.

"I'm serious! One threw a shoe at me because the flowers were "too pink!" How can pink flowers be too pink?"

Now I'm hunched over in laughter. I can see that happening! Oh, but I'd be in a panic if I were in Liam's shoes. Standing up, I wipe the tears from my eyes to say, "I don't know, but I wish I was there to see that."

"It was one of the scariest moments of my life. I've been traumatized."

"Yeah, right," I snort, stopping short of what else I had to say when I feel a sudden chill run down my spine. The hair on the back of my neck stands up. After another shiver, I rub my arms and glance back to stare wide-eyed at the balcony on the second floor.

Lord Makai is there, out on the terrace as if he appeared simply because I wished him to. My cheeks warm when our eyes meet. The smile falls from my face without my meaning to, but Lord Makai suddenly heads back inside without even acknowledging that he saw me. Although, I guess there's no reason why he should.

I bite my lip.

"Wallie, you coming?" calls Liam.

"Y-Yeah, be right there!"

When the day comes to an end, Liam and I are on our way back to the front doors. My cheeks hurt from how much smiling I've done today. Liam was true to his word, he did his best to be entertaining. I think I laughed more in the last few hours than I have in months. However, just as we round the corner of the estate and see the others speaking at the front doors, Liam comes to a sudden halt. I do the same, facing him with a raised brow.

"Something wrong?" I ask.

Liam looks away nervously.

"Did you forget to do something?" I gesture behind us. "We can head back real quick."

"No, no, it's not that," he answers. His cheeks are turning pink then full on red when he faces me. "Actually, uh...I was wondering if, um, maybe you'd like to get a drink some time...with me?"

"A...drink?"

"Or a bite to eat or...or something."

My throat goes dry. Liam likely isn't much better judging by the shivering in his fingers. I'd say it's from the cold, but it has warmed up quite a bit this afternoon. Liam's watching me nervously, biting at his bottom lip while I'm not really sure what kind of expression I'm making. My cheeks warm up because that was definitely a request for a date.

I haven't the time to even consider it though before a familiar voice calls out to me, "Wallie."

My spine goes completely straight. Liam looks on the verge of shitting himself. I understand why when I turn to find Soran standing with the

others a few feet away. His eyes are fierce, glaring absolute hate at Liam. If looks could kill, Liam wouldn't just be dead, his very presence would be wiped from existence.

"What are you two doing?" asks Higra, either unaware of the situation or pretending to be. She gestures for us to come closer. "Is everything finished up, Liam?"

"Uh, y-yeah! Everything is...finished." Liam smiles nervously while he and I rush over to the others.

Soran's gaze is on me. I can feel it. My stomach is twisting into a knot while Liam keeps a distance between himself and Lord Makai. I don't blame him because when I glance back I find Soran continuing to glare at Liam as if he kicked his puppy or burned down his house. I don't know, but it's pretty bad.

"We'll return tomorrow with your orders, Your Grace," says the woman that had left earlier with Higra. She's looking over her notes. "And get to work on what we can."

Lord Makai nods.

"Thanks so much for coming today." Higra bows politely with Enith and I following suit.

"Thank you for your continued patronage. It is an honor to serve His Grace."

The landscapers bow to Lord Makai before leaving. Liam takes a chance of glancing back once, attempting to smile at me until Soran clicks his tongue so loud it somehow sounds like a snap. Liam goes blue in the face then doesn't chance another look back.

Well, that was awkward...and weird.

I glance to Lord Makai but he's already heading back inside. Higra is speaking with him while Enith appears as confused as I am. We both shrug,

neither quite sure what happened. While Enith leaves to finish up his duties, I head back inside just in time to hear Soran say, "Have someone else attend to Liam tomorrow."

"What?" I ask, causing Lord Makai and Higra to face me from the top of the stairs. I rush up to meet them. "Why? Isn't it better to have someone there that the landscapers are already comfortable with?"

Lord Makai is clearly not pleased with my questioning. He doesn't even bother to answer, simply reiterating himself, "Another will attend to Liam tomorrow. You will return to your usual duties."

"But-"

Lord Makai and Higra shoot me a glare. Honestly, Higra frightens me more at this point so I shut my trap. That gives Lord Makai time to leave, disappearing into his office with Higra pursing her lips in annoyance. I bow my head, waiting for the lecture.

"Follow me, Wallace," says Higra, gesturing for me to do so.

I raise a brow but keep two steps behind her when she glides through the halls to one of the guest bedrooms. She shuts and locks the door behind us, stepping further inside until she's standing near the hearth. I keep a few paces between us, hands behind my back, uncertain of what she wishes to discuss.

Am I about to get a worse lecture than I thought? Did she hear Liam asking me out and is unhappy about it? I suppose flirting on the job is not something Higra would be ok with. She's pretty old school.

"Let me be frank, Wallace," says Higra with a firm stare, but her eyes continuously glance to the door and her voice is low. "I have known Lord Makai for over forty years. Although His Grace shares little with us, I've learned quite a bit about him."

She steps closer, her firm stare turning into one of pity. "You receive special treatment from His Grace. You must be aware of this as well, correct?"

I don't answer but my looking away is probably answer enough.

"He cares for you," she says softly.

The fact that Higra has noticed must mean others have too, I guess that shouldn't surprise me after everything that's happened. I always hoped those at the estate didn't pay it any mind but that's obviously not true. At the same time, my heart can't help but skip with joy that it's so obvious Soran treats me differently. Something has to be wrong with me, seriously, I'm going mad!

Suddenly, Higra's voice grows cold when she says, "Though I am uncertain of what relationship the two of you have I must ask that...that you reconsider."

I raise my gaze to meet hers when I ask, "Reconsider?"

"I have been ordered by Prince Baylor to keep my eye on the two of you."

My eyes widen in shock.

"Lord Makai is already aware of my working for him, he simply does not care. His Grace is aware of most of us actually, or is at least suspecting of it."

"Why would...but that's-"

"I am going on sixty-seven years old, Wallace. I am a widow, raising and supporting my five grandchildren alone. Trust me when I say, I need the money...and I cannot risk saying no to a man that can and will do them harm." Higra turns away when her voice starts to break. "While His Grace could do the same, I know that he wouldn't. As cruel as he may be at times, even if he is not like us, as much as he frightens even myself, I know that he would never harm innocent children so I do what I have to."

I'm at a loss for words, nothing but a puff of air escapes my lips. There's shock then distrust that builds until I'm asking in a rush, "Why are you

telling me all this? If you're working with the prince then this is going against his orders."

"It most certainly is, but just because I work for him doesn't mean I like the smug bastard."

I gape. Higra said bastard? I've never heard her cuss. Wow, he must have really pissed her off at some point. Still, this doesn't add up.

"How do I know you're not...trying to get something out of me?" I ask causing Higra to tilt her head curiously.

"Get something out of you?"

"I don't know, an admittance that something may or may not be going on. You're working for the prince so this in itself can be a trap."

"It very well could be, anything you do here now could be a trap. Anyone you speak to could have an ulterior motive."

I think I'm going to be sick.

Higra faces me now that she has composed herself. "It's up to you whether you decide to believe me or not," she speaks firmly. "I am simply telling you what I can; that the prince wouldn't ask me to keep watch over the two of you if he didn't suspect that there was something...special. Even if I were to lie, there are others that are likely keeping their eyes on you as well. He will use this to his advantage. He will use you to get to Lord Makai...you understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

"I understand," I whisper. My hands fall limp at my side. Guilt builds in my gut until I can taste sour on my tongue. "But to, as you put it, reconsider...that--it doesn't matter anymore. Hasn't the damage already been done? Prince Baylor has already spoken with me. I know he's waiting for the time to do something horrible."

"Horrible doesn't even begin to describe what the royals are capable of. It can't describe what His Grace is capable of either. This world is not kind to

those like us, Wallace."

That isn't something I wanted to hear, but ok, thanks!

"What you wish to do is up to you," she says. "But if there's a way for you to get out of here, to leave this behind and never look back, then I suggest you take it."

"You're telling me to run? How can that help?" I ask around a snort. "Where would I go that the Baylor's can't find me? What would I do?"

"I don't know, but staying here is a death sentence."

"But Lord Makai--"

"Cannot always be with you."

That drives a spear into my gut, one that has my legs going weak.

Higra doesn't mince her words when she explains, "No matter how strong Lord Makai is, a time will come when even he cannot save you. Lord Makai knows this as well."

Higra steps over to me. She places her hands on my shoulders. It's the first time she gives me a smile, sad but a smile nonetheless.

"I like you, Wallace. You're a good boy and you certainly don't deserve to be in this mess. This is the most I can do for you." She pats my cheek. "I can only hope things work out. I'm sorry."

Nothing more is shared. Higra walks away, leaving me alone with my thoughts that have me dropping into a chair by the fire. I'm exhausted from a mere conversation, although the topic was so unsettling that even now I'm shaking.

What I want to do and what I should do feel as if they are on exact opposite sides of the spectrum and I can't decide which way to go. Even Higra has noticed there's something going on between Soran and me. What that something is, even I'm not entirely sure. The confident side of me wishes to

call it some form of romantic interest while the realistic side is cry laughing at the mere thought.

But it is true that I receive special treatment. I get away with a lot more than others. That is enough to put a target on my back. If I stay, Prince Baylor will see that as a sign. I can be used as a weapon against Soran and--

"No matter how strong Lord Makai is, a time will come when even he cannot save you. Lord Makai knows this as well."

What Higra said jogs my memory of the closed off room, of the teddy bear and the blanket and the painting. There has been others, others in Soran's life that meant something to him. They are no longer here and I think it's safe to assume that the time came for them when Soran could not save them.

That same time may come to me, and how would Soran feel after being reminded yet again that whatever he cares about will always be taken away?

✝✝✝

Long chapter, yay! We got a jealous Soran ;) Liam better watch his back! But oh, Higra came clean about being a spy =O Do you think this is a trap or is she seriously just doing what she can to help? What will Wallie's decision be, try to find a way out or stay?

Remember to check out my new story, —K :)

✝Forty-One✝

There's a packed bag hidden beneath my bed that no one knows about save for me. Who knew an item as simple as a bag could cause such crushing guilt.

Higra's words ring in my ears the following morning. I wish not to see her. Already the idea of it puts me on edge, makes me continue to consider what actions I should take. But there is still work to be done no matter how troubled the current situation is, as I'm reminded when I enter the servant's lounge.

"Wallie, you'll be attending to Lord Makai today," says Layne.

"What? W-Why?"

"I've been asked to escort the landscapers in your place." Layne pats my shoulder. "Careful today, Wallie. He's in a foul mood."

Before I can argue, Higra is already calling for Layne. He's gone in a flash, seeming almost thrilled at being relieved of his usual duties. How nice for him because I'm dreading this.

When entering the foyer, I catch a glimpse of Liam through the windows. Dare I say it, he appears a bit disappointed to find Layne greeting him rather than me. Suppose I expected to see him today too, even if Soran said yesterday that I wouldn't be.

My brow furrows when I turn to the stairs. They seem almost dreadful in nature, looming, somehow extending into eternity. I know why, it's that guilt continuing to gnaw at my gut. Guilt over my indecisiveness. As I ascend the stairs, I question my future plans. After what Higra said, do I risk staying? Do I risk leaving? There is a chance that, should I leave and Soran not react then I may be spared whatever horrors Prince Baylor has planned. There is also a chance that he will only act sooner should Soran act negatively to my sudden disappearance.

This is difficult. Far more difficult than I suspected, although I never expected to find myself in a situation such as this.

A maid passes me by, and suddenly I'm aware of her; of her eyes and movements, of everyone's movements. The quiet opening of a door down the hall, whispers downstairs and two butlers dusting the paintings in the halls, there are so many eyes everywhere. At all times. The hair on the back of my neck grows stiff. My limbs tingle and toes curl. Suddenly, the world feels small, constricted to the point that my chest tightens. Anyone can be watching at any moment, my every move is being examined, including now.

I take a deep and unsteady breath. I don't know what to do. The door to Soran's office feels heavier, but I put on a smile anyways when I step inside.

Soran sits at his desk, head down even after hearing my entrance. One of the terrace doors is open, letting in a comforting breeze from the abnormally warm day. The curtains are brushed back so light filters in to illuminate Soran's figure at the desk. His hair shines and eyes flash a brilliant red when he happens to turn his head just so. I'm not acknowledged until I stand before his desk, hands behind my back.

"I've come to relieve Layne of his duties. Are you in need of anything, Your Grace?"

"Your studies, how have they been going?" asks Soran, which actually makes me smile, authentically at least. When Soran raises his gaze, there's something about the way he looks at me that makes me short of breath. Or maybe it's simply because he's looking at me.

Either way, I'm beaming when I answer, "Quite well! I'm sure I can be of assistance if you need anything."

"I need you to separate these based on departments." Soran gestures to a stack of papers on the side of his desk. When I walk over, he points out the five departments so I immediately recognize the words then we get to work quietly with me sitting on the couch, using the coffee table to separate. I'm tempted to ask how they were bunched together since I imagine the

departments at any of his companies send these in correctly, but I rather not risk it. Layne said Soran...I'm still calling him Soran. Damn, whatever, it's only in my head!

Anyways, Layne said Soran was in a bad mood so I would rather be safe than sorry. I work quietly but not necessarily well. I'm very aware of Soran's presence. I spot him in my peripheral vision from time to time. The sound of his pen scratching across paper followed by an occasional sigh or huff. All so simple yet my entire body is shivering.

Sudden laughter filters in through the terrace door. Soran's brow furrows in annoyance so I'm quick to stand.

"I'll close the door so you can concentrate, My Lord."

When I get to said door, I find Layne and Liam standing out in the garden. Liam happens to look up in time to see me, waving his hand enthusiastically. I barely catch him shouting the first syllable of my name before I'm brushed aside when Soran swiftly shuts the door.

"I thought you were going to close the door?" he grunts, returning to his desk immediately afterwards.

"My apologies, I happened to see Liam and Layne outside. I wished to say hello." And honestly, I hesitated because I wondered why Soran switched me with Layne. I want to know why I'm here when it's clear we've been avoiding each other. I want to know a lot of things that I don't know if I'll get the answers even when I dare to ask, "Why was I switched with Layne, Your Grace?"

"Because I said so," answers Soran without so much as a hint of consideration. He's glaring at me, but it doesn't hold the same fire it does for others. The fact that I notice that now excites and concerns me.

"That's not a reason."

"Isn't it?" Soran looks away, writing more but his movements are slower as he speaks. "Why? Did you want to see Liam again?"

"I certainly wouldn't mind? He's a nice guy, and I think he'd like for me to escort him as well."

Soran snorts. "I'm sure he would have."

That sounded like a very loaded response. One that has me swiftly stepping forward to argue, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Only there is no arguing further than that.

Soran pushes his chair back, preparing for an argument, just as I reach his side. The arm of the chair hits the outside of my knee, successfully knocking me off balance. I'm falling and instinct says to reach out to steady myself, so I do. One hand grips the back of Soran's chair with my wrist holding my weight against the back while the other grasps the opposite arm, successfully steadying me. I actually laugh, surprised with my own ability to not smash my face against Soran's desk, or the floor. However, that victory is short lived upon realizing I sure as hell did not save myself.

My cheeks are blazing hot when I look up to find that the angle of Soran's chair has resulted in me leaning over him. The space between us is so little that I can count the shades of red in his eyes. I don't know if I hear myself or Soran swallowing the lump in his throat, maybe it's the both of us because his eyes are as wide as my own. And there it is again; that light shade of pink beneath Sorans' eyes.

Why haven't I moved? I don't know. I'm not really thinking about that, especially when Soran's cool fingers wrap around my wrist. He must feel my pulse against his thumb that now rests hesitantly on my arm. Damn, I feel my own pulse in my head, in the tip of my toes to the pit of my stomach.

I don't think I'm breathing. I don't know if he is either. In the back of my mind there's a voice saying to pull away but that's all it is; a voice that is heard but not yielded.

One of us moves slightly forward; I honestly can't say who. Our noses brush. I hear a soft intake of his breath, even feel it against my lips. My

eyes flutter closed, anticipating what's to come.

Then it's over.

Soran looks away, pressing a hand to my chest to force me to step back.

✝✝✝

Hello, thy name is slow burn, but who knows, maybe this will lead to a kiss soon ;D (Me, I know haha) Jealous Soran is a moody cutie, isn't he? ^^ Oh, and if anyone is interested, I have a YouTube channel. It's been dead lately but I'm going to try posting more videos! My username is Twoony or you can use the external link that I left. It'll take you to my latest video where I play The Sims 4 as Aron and Quinton lol

✝Forty-Two✝

I stumble a bit, barely catching myself on the desk when he stands, clearing his throat as he does so. There's a sinking feeling of dread and worry that is only worsened when Soran grumbles, "You may return to your usual duties for today, Wallace."

"But the papers--"

"I'll deal with them." Soran gestures to the door. "Go."

"O-Of course...Your Grace."

I bow as swiftly as I can. Whatever dignity I can muster is festered in a single moment so I can make it out the door without further incident. But I barely make it down the hall before my knees almost give out. I press my weight to the wall then slide to the floor after a deep breath that buries itself into my stomach. There's a sinking feeling, like someone has gripped my gut and continuously pulls. It's not a pain but a discomfort that makes my shoulders roll and skin break out with goosebumps.

I can't believe that just happened. Holy shit. That...that was--

I ruffle my hair in frustration or maybe embarrassment, possibly even both? Either way, I want to scream and kick like a little kid but refrain from doing so. Others are staring at me oddly when they happen to pass by. I need to get up but my hands are shaking so I shake them more as if that'll help. It doesn't.

Stupid, stupid! How could I be so stupid?

I smack myself upside the head a few times.

What the hell was I thinking even mentioning Liam? And freaking tripping to basically fall into Soran's lap? WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?! I need to

dig a deep hole and throw myself into it. Even then I don't know if I can hide from this shame. Ugh!

After working up the nerve to stand, I brush myself off and attempt to compose myself. I doubt I succeed, especially with these all consuming thoughts. Even if logically this is a huge mess, there is no point denying my feelings for Soran. Honestly, I don't think there is any point denying Soran's feelings either. Whether they are on par with my own is beyond me, but interest is certainly there, otherwise none of this would have happened, right? There's no way we'd be as close as we are. The teasing, the apologies, the clothes, all the special treatment and the damn blushing and that--

I slam my head against one of the bed posts in the guest room I'm cleaning. Luckily the door is shut and no one else is around so no questions are asked as I continue to literally try and knock some sense into my knogan.

That what? That almost kiss? That definitely would have been a kiss if Soran were anyone else? That moment that can easily get me fired because what the hell was I thinking just standing there and letting it happen?! Let's take the part of him being an immortal vampire out of the equation, he's my boss, and a royal one at that. We wouldn't be of the same world even if he were human. I rely on him and the job he gives me for food and shelter, there's not exactly an even distribution of power here. The boundary between butler and employer isn't easily crossed! Although my dumb ass self found it pretty easy to trip into said employer's lap.

"What's wrong with you, Wallie?" I groan, falling onto the bed next and slamming my fists against it like a toddler. I don't even care that I just made the damn thing, I'll fix it in a moment! Right now, I'm having a crisis!

What should I do?

I roll onto my back to stare into the brown canopy of the bed. There's no answers stitched into the fabric, no magical fairy godmother pops up to tell me how to live my life. There's only my own thoughts, my own worries and concerns and fears and hopes all meshed together to form a blob that I haven't a clue what to do with.

Do I stay?

Does Soran even want me to stay?

He pushed me away...so these feelings are not ones he's willing to accept. I understand that, truly I do. I don't need to know the specifics of his past to guess that he has lost those he has loved, that he has learned to keep everything and everyone at a distance. That isn't fair, but is it fair for me to stay if I'm not wanted? If my being here will cause more harm to Soran than good, isn't it best that I'm the one that leaves?

I slide off the bed so I can mope on the floor. No matter what I think, no matter how many times I go over it in my head, the only option I can come up with is to leave. I hate it. It isn't fair. To either of us. I want to stay. I want Soran to like me back, to the point that he's as tormented as I am. How twisted is that?

I want to take a chance with Soran, if he'd let me, if he wanted it too. But I don't know if he has an answer. I don't know if he wants to give an answer, or if I'm even brave enough to ask.

So that night, when the house is asleep, when the moon is high and the sky a sea of stars, I retrieve that hidden bag beneath the bed.

The estate is silent. The howl of the wind holds a higher tune than my own steps. The single lantern I carry casts a warm orange glow that slowly moves through the mansion until I'm standing in the foyer. The doors appear twice as large as if they're taunting me.

What I plan to do, where I plan to go, if this is even a good idea, I haven't a clue. I don't have any answers. There's a constant what if, what if I stay and what if I go and what if Soran doesn't want me here and what if I tell him the truth? What will he say and what will we do? This confusion is eating me alive. And if I keep this up I'll continuously find reasons to stay.

That can't happen, or it shouldn't? I'm not entirely sure.

So I take a deep breath, clear my thoughts then click open the lock of the front door. When said doors open, I hesitate in the doorway, peering at the trail that leads into town. The one that originally led me here and is now going to send me away.

I grip the doorknob until my knuckles throb.

There's fear that I won't even make it to town, worry that I won't make it out of Vashna, but there's fear I won't live much longer should I stay here either. And then there's the fear of whether or not Soran cares, how I kind of hope he doesn't so it won't cause harm but then how stupid I'd feel if he didn't. It's a big mess, one that has me sighing heavily as I turn to take the final look back; a final look that has me freezing in place.

Atop the stairs, watching me with a pained expression that words could never dream to describe, is Soran.

Brows furrowed. Bottom lip clamped between his teeth. Arms crossed protectively. Shoulders caved in with clear shame and, dare I say it, disappointment. Soran doesn't look the least bit like the fearsome Archduke everyone thinks him to be; there's only a sad man atop the stairs, frowning in the cold moonlight.

There's shame and guilt, two emotions that Soran has no reason to show yet they're clear as day. Even more so when his gaze turns away, dark and trembling.

Please tell me he doesn't misunderstand. Please tell me he doesn't think I'm leaving due to disgust.

When he retreats without a word, panic sets in.

✝✝✝

Also, don't hate on Wallie. He'd get shit regardless of what he chooses to do unless they got together so, just, don't hate on him. Please try to see it from his perspective. Extra update this week, no worries, I'll have another update tomorrow ;) *sips tea* Hmm, this isn't going so well, is

it? What do you think of how Wallie is feeling; his concern towards Soran's long life and the troubles he has faced, not wishing to be added to that list? Do you think Soran is misunderstanding? Will Wallie still leave?

✝Forty-Three✝

"Soran!"

The door shuts behind my rushed steps that I don't even realize I'm making until I'm ascending the stairs. The lantern screeches in my grasp. The light cuts harsh shapes in the darkness. My feet stumble up the steps; his grow further and further away. A door opens then slams shut.

I'm right behind him, setting the lantern aside to knock on his bedroom door as if I expect him to open it "Soran, wait, it's...it's not--" I press my head to the door, uncertain what I'm saying or why I'm here.

A few silent, tormenting moments pass until Soran asks as if he could read my mind, "Why are you still here, Wallie?"

"It's not what you think."

"Not what I think?" He hums. "Whatever do you mean?"

I don't know what to say. Does it matter at this point? Haven't I already made up my mind to go? Isn't this for the best? This is an end that will help us both. Soran will think little of me and if there are any feelings they'll diminish as quick as they appeared. I should walk away.

But I don't.

I don't want to. As foolish as it is, I want to stay.

"It's all right, you may leave," says Soran, voice nothing more than a soft hum. "Everyone eventually does."

The fact that he even says that, and accepts it, infuriates me. It infuriates and hurts at the same time. Thinking that I was about to add to his pain makes my entire body shake with disgust.

"It's not like that," I argue. My chest weighs me down with crushing guilt.

"Not like what?"

He needs to understand.

I bite my lip and try to explain, "What happened earlier today...I'm not leaving because of that."

"Is that so? What is the reason then? Perhaps you're merely tired of working here?"

I shake my head even if he can't see me.

"Or have you finally grown tired of the threats?"

I want to argue that's not it either.

"Or, more realistically," Soran's voice shakes. "Disgust."

I need him to understand.

"I'm leaving because I like you, damn it!" I finally shout, eyes widening in shock afterwards; *did I really just say that?*

But before I can panic, before I can berate myself for the lack of coordination between my mind and my mouth, the door opens.

I stumble away, peering into the darkness of Soran's room only to find deep red eyes staring back at me. He takes a step into the hall, the moonlight cutting across his solemn expression when he asks, "Do you know me well enough to say that, Wallace?"

He steps closer. I think he expects me to take one back, but I don't. I remain in place, watching Soran lean towards me with a cold stare.

"After what you've seen, after what you've heard, when you know that I carry more secrets that could be far worse than the last, are you sure you can like someone like that?"

How unfortunate for him that I've already thought about that and so have no issue answering immediately, "Yes, I like you, Soran."

It's almost comical how Soran's facade breaks to show one of bewilderment. I think I've become an expert at surprising him. If the situation was different, I'd be proud.

"Do you want me to leave?" I ask the question that's been truly bothering me, that's making my hands tremble.

Soran gives no response other than that slight wrinkle in his nose; the one he does when feigning annoyance. Feigning being the key word.

"I admit I don't know everything about you, but that doesn't change the fact that I like you, the real you." I press my finger to that crease in his nose. He steps back, rubbing the area with a raised brow.

"You wrinkle your nose to feign annoyance," I laugh while smiling up at him. "And you take enough sugar in your morning tea to energize an entire army. You hate when people smile at you because you never know if it's authentic. You're not a morning person. You're strict but it's because you believe in the abilities of others, and even offer them a chance to better themselves--"

Soran backs away as if to leave. I swiftly take his hand in mine, the way I did on The Day of Aberia. Only this time my hand wraps around his in a tight hold. Although his fingers are cold, the connection warms me to my core. His hand, however, goes completely stiff. There's tension, a tension I can not only feel but also see.

"You're unusually chatty when you wish to be," I continue. "You're petty, stubborn and you can take things too far, but it's because you've been shown time and time again what will happen if you don't. You're funny and kind and desperately wish to fit in, to have the normal life that was never even offered--"

"Stop," Soran orders, at least I think he meant for it to be. It comes out more as a plea than anything else. He attempts to pull his hand away but I only

grip harder.

"You think too highly of me. You see what I allow you to see," he mumbles, sounding like he's trying to convince himself more than me. "There's so much more than that, and I assure you it isn't good."

I don't know what he wants from me. I don't know what I want from myself. And based on his evasive gaze, I'm not so sure Soran knows what he wants either.

I slip my fingers between his, relishing in the touch that I'm uncertain I'll feel again. Soran fixates on the connection when I repeat my earlier question, "Do you want me to stay, Soran?"

His expression grows more troubled, taking his bottom lip between his teeth.

"I know how I feel and others know too."

Soran's eyes darken. He knows of whom I speak.

"By now, it's dangerous to stay and it's dangerous to go, but I know my feelings for you will only continue to grow should I stay. I don't know about you though."

Soran doesn't answer. I wonder if he's even listening. What's he thinking? What does he want to happen? What does he expect? I can't even take a guess based on his apathetic expression. His eyes are cold and distant.

"If you want me to leave then I will," I tell him with a shaky breath. "I'll bury these feelings and go because I honestly don't know what else to do."

Perhaps Soran doesn't know either. He's quiet. So am I. The mansion is almost eerie in the silent darkness of the night. Soran won't face me. He sighs, eyes closed in thought or maybe it's worry. It's almost twisted how I'm relieved that this is troubling him; his actions reaffirm my own feelings and says more about his than he's likely willing to share.

Then Soran finally faces me with an almost pleading stare.

"Bury these feelings?" He whispers. There's a brief moment where Soran doesn't seem to know what to say or what to do; the confliction is evident through his stiff muscles and furrowed brow.

Then everything changes when he suddenly leans in, breathing every word against my lips, "It's too late for that, Wallie."

Soran's kiss tastes of winter when the first snow falls. A soft and cool caress, like the touch of freshly fallen snow against my lips. There's almost a sorrow to the touch, a shaking desperation.

What Soran is thinking, is he excited or scared? Does he think I don't want this? Does he regret it? I hope not, because I don't regret it and I want this.

His hand cradles my cheek, as gentle and hesitant as the pressure against my lips. I trap our hands between us when stepping closer, my other hand resting on his waist. My fingers twist into the fabric of his silk shirt as I press my lips firmly against his.

That damn hearing of his can't possibly be missing out on the erratic beating of my heart. Even if it is, he must feel it against him. We're melded together, chest to chest, lips to lips. When his hand releases mine, it's only to wrap around my waist. My own move to wrap around his shoulders just as his tongue parts my lips to prove how warm he can really be.

When we pull apart for a breath, that's all it is. A quick breath before we're leaning in for another. We meet part way and knock our lips together a bit rougher than probably expected. But I chuckle into the kiss then feel Soran's smile. I want to see it, but it's a bit hard to think about anything other than kissing or his thumb gently caressing my cheek. Gentle and warm and everything Soran really is in a single touch that drives me completely mad. My entire body is warm and cold all at once. Soran's hair is soft between my fingers that curl into the short black locks. And his lips are more addicting than I expected, knocking every thought out of my mind until I can only focus on this moment. It's seared into my memory forever.

When our kiss comes to an end, we're breathless and, apparently, speechless. My lips brush his with every breath. His eyes are the most

beautiful shade of red I've ever seen, deep and calming.

I'm cradling Soran's neck as he presses his forehead against mine. Smiling, I take a chance to ask, "Does this mean you want me to stay?"

"Is that really what you should be asking right now?"

"You're right." I nod, grinning mischievously. "Do you like me too, Your Grace? Or do you shove your tongue down any workers thro--"

Soran shoves his hand in my face to push me away. I laugh, continuing to blush even after the kiss has ended. But I am pleased to say Soran's cheeks are pink too so the blushing is mutual.

"You should get some rest," he says, retreating and disappearing into his room.

Huh?

I'm confused, a little taken aback too. I'm not sure what I expected but everything ending like this leaves me troubled. Doesn't seem like this is actually the end though when Soran returns with a key ring, one I've never seen. He holds it in his grasp, hesitant to hand it over.

Inevitably, Soran places the keys in my hands when he says in a cold whisper, "I want you to stay, Wallie."

He looks to the closed off doors in the halls, eyes flashing with a mix of anger and sorrow. When he faces me, there's guilt and pain evident in his eyes, in his voice, in the very way he holds himself.

"But you must seriously consider what it means for me to even hope for that, and for you to even risk it." Soran wraps my fingers around the keys.

"I don't...what are you asking me to do?"

"Go into the rooms. They won't hold all the answers, but I assume you can put the pieces together."

He retreats into the darkness of his room once more so only the red of his eyes are visible. With his gaze lowered, he softly says, "As you said, it is a risk to stay and it is a risk to go, but if leaving is what you think is best after reconsidering then I will do whatever I can to make sure you are out of harm's way. I am more capable now than I once was."

I want to ask what that means, but Soran is already closing his door.

"Think this matter over seriously, Wallie. I plan to do the same."

Then the door closes with a soft click of the lock.

The excitement of the kiss is extinguished as quick as it was sparked. Here I thought we were on the same page. I thought the kiss was his answer, simple as that. Admittedly, I'm a little disappointed even if I understand. Admittedly, I know I should have known better. With Soran, nothing is ever simple.

When I look to the locked rooms and feel the keys in my grasp, I fear what answers they'll give me. But I think it's safe to say I've already considered this seriously and, perhaps, it is Soran that needs this time more than me.

✝✝✝

Tehehehe, it never is just a happy kiss, is it? :D But hey, they kissed so don't you even come at me xD What do you think is going through Soran's head right about now? What will Soran's answer end up being? How will Wallie react to what he finds in the closed off rooms?

✝Forty-Four✝

I'm scared, although it is a fear that differs greatly from what I've felt before, like on the night that assassin nearly took my life. This fear is more of a worry, a worry over what the future holds.

Once I step through these locked doors, I will know more than most, not more than all seeing as Higra and Layne are aware of the secrets behind these doors. However, handing me these keys, the one's as cold as ice in the palm of my hand, is Soran's way of letting me in.

It's his way of saying he wants me here but isn't certain I should be. I understand. I've been having the same thoughts, but he said it himself; it's too late to bury these feelings. They're here to stay. Others know. I don't want to leave, something tells me it will be useless even if I did, so I will find these truths and hope to avoid the past repeating itself.

The first keyhole is square shaped and leads to the room I glimpsed once before. When the door opens, I'm met with a familiar sight. Everything is as it was, somehow more alive than Soran's room yet eerily dead. The painting that caught my attention the first time, I see it fully now. My heart immediately aches with sorrow then unbridled rage.

The painting is a masterpiece; a beautiful family portrait.

Soran's smile is filled to the brim with love as he holds a young girl with brown hair and green eyes. She appears just as happy to be held by Soran, a young, bright and bubbly child.

Beside Soran is a beautiful woman that must be in her forties. She appears youthful with a dazzling smile and appearance that matches, what I'm presuming to be, her daughter sitting in Soran's lap; the same brown hair and green eyes.

Behind the woman is a teenage girl with long black hair in a navy dress that only brings out the green of her eyes. Her hand is on her mother's shoulder

and the other wrapped around the arm of her father beside her, presumably at least. They look very similar, only his eyes are a warm brown, the same as the last person in the portrait; a young son. He's likely barely into his teens with hair the same deep black as his dad's. He's holding the hilt of a sword at his side with the Makai family crest etched into the silver handle.

There is only happiness and love in their smiles. They are close together, huddled happily in a painting that probably took days, if not weeks, to finish. The colors are slightly faded but taking a guess at the age, it's a miracle the painting continues to exist at all. Soran must have imbued it with magic, otherwise it would be long gone. Actually, I imagine these rooms are imbued with magic in general.

I step closer to inspect the portrait, wondering who they really are.

Looking at Soran, then admiring the others, I can't deny that there are some similarities between them. The father and Soran share the most similarities though.

I thought the Makai family was wiped out? Emperor Elyon saw to it. Whether Soran and the man in this painting are related by blood or not, it is clear that this is...or rather, was Soran's family at some point.

In the room there are signs of the wife and husband. There's jewelry and neckties on a vanity as well as a horror book on the bedside table and some half knitted mittens on the other. This must have been their room and Soran keeps it the same to this day. That is most telling of their importance. How long has it been like this? With Soran's age, there's no telling when these people were a part of his life.

I'm both curious and dreading to see the remaining rooms, locking the door after I leave to go to the next.

I fumble with the keys, finding the one in the shape of a diamond. It clicks open, revealing the youthful room of a girl with sundresses and plastic flower headbands on the vanity. Although we've never met, something tells me she was as bright as her room, warm and sunny. There's a handkerchief on her bedside table though, with stitching in it that reads, "Josette Makai."

Was that the girl's name? Josette?

I'm uncertain since I cannot stomach looking through her belongings, and yet I continue to go to the next room.

The keyhole is shaped like a spade and shows a room that presumably belonged to the young boy. The room is of leather and warm browns. There's a sword above the fireplace but it is not the same one tethered to his waist in the painting. And in his room there are papers on the desk, one of which is a letter that my eyes cannot help but stare at in shock for the very first few words tell more than anything else.

"Dearest Uncle Soran,"

Uncle Soran. Even if I thought earlier that this was Soran's family, this only proves my suspicions. I almost didn't want it to because that means there is so much to Soran that others do not know. So much that he's hiding, that I imagine he wants and needs to talk about. If these people are his family then what happened to them and why has no one ever brought them up?

I take a seat at the desk when my legs start to shake. My fingers dance over the edge of the half written letter that I slowly read:

"Dearest Uncle Soran,

Life is mundane at the estate without you. Mundane and tedious, honestly.

Josette continues her frivolous attempts to slather me in a ridiculous white powder that is, apparently, all the rave among the young ladies. She says it will help my complexion, but I find that it makes one resemble a corpse. I risked telling her this and would you believe she hit me so hard I got a knot? She is a brute!

And Annalee is being...well, Annalee. She misses you terribly, we all do. But she wishes me to read to her every night. When I do not read as you do, she throws a fit. When we do not let her sleep in your bed, she throws an even bigger fit. I grow tired of playing with her everyday. I have training to do! I wish to do more. I want to get better. I want to be as good as you one day.

Training with father is alright but, and I dare not tell him this, he is getting old. I am having to slow myself down for him. It is better to spar with you!

Will you be coming home soon, Uncle? Please tell me you are. I miss you--"

The letter trails off as if the boy was stopped by something, but I don't know if I could have read further even if it continued on. There are tears in my eyes that slowly trickle down my cheeks.

To think Soran had a family that cherished him so much. This Josette, this Annalee and this young boy, three children that clearly loved Soran with all their heart, and presumably their parents felt the same, yet they're gone. And their rooms are proof that they likely did not pass by old age.

They likely didn't even reach adulthood.

My gut twists when I leave the room, praying that the last, the one likely belonging to the youngest, Annalee, shows some sign of aging. Maybe the first room was hers and this will be Josette's, older and more mature. I just want to know that these kids had a chance at life.

But that hope is crushed when the door with a heart shaped key swings open to reveal a room clearly belonging to a young child.

There are porcelain teacups on the coffee table for a party among stuffed animals. There are fairy tale books lining the shelves by the canopy bed. One stands out in particular, as if often picked up by the young girl and when I reach for it, I immediately know why it was probably her favorite.

"To our princess, Annalee,I know you are unhappy about my going away, but I promise it will only be for a short while.
Do not be sad. Do not worry. I will be alright.
But should you be sad and should you worry, read this book and think of me. I promise I will read them all to you when I return.
I love you, and I will love you until the end of time. You know that I will.
Love,
Uncle Soran"

If Annalee threw fits when Soran was not around, as her brother's letter said, then there is no doubt how much she loved Soran. And this book says so with it's frayed pages that a child likely read day in and day out when her uncle was away. Then she likely made that same uncle read the tales to her every night when he returned.

I imagine Soran sitting in the chair at her bedside, telling a story to three excited children. What happened to them and why have I never heard about them? Why were they not mentioned in books or the lineage of the Makai name? Is that what Soran wants me to see? Is this what he wants me to realize?

That this family of his does not exist in books or tales, likely because those in power want it to be so. Should someone, someone like Cathen, find my existence to be an annoyance, will he do away with me the same? Will I not only lose my life, but also my very existence? Because there are no records of these people other than the one Soran has within himself, other than these rooms and these halls filled with a memory that belongs to one man.

Is that what will become of me? Eventually, I will be only a painful memory for Soran and Soran alone. I admit that is a heavy thought, a frightening one, to think I can simply...disappear, quite literally cease to exist.

But once more I ask myself, does it matter at this point? What we do, whether we go along with these feelings between us, Cathen already knows. If he does, others likely do as well. I'm already a target and if that's the case, I much rather have a memory with Soran than none at all. Or is that selfish? Is it selfish of me to want that? Because I cannot even fathom what it's like for Soran. For him to see the family that likely took his own. To know that those he loves are gone and forgotten, that only his memory of them remains and he must live with that for eternity, alone.

That is the one constant Soran has always known; loneliness.

I sigh and return the book to its rightful place. The door is locked behind me and I stand in the hall even more uncertain than before.

Soran does not come out of his room. I do not knock. It's late and I think it's safe to say we both have a lot to think about. I'm not sure what I plan to say come tomorrow. I don't know what he wants me to say, but I know I don't want to leave. Even knowing that Soran has lost loved ones, that even someone as strong as him cannot always protect me, I want to stay.

So I keep the keys in my grasp as I grab my things and return to my room.

Hael is asleep and unaware. The keys are slipped under my pillow where I keep hold of them through the night. I never fall asleep, only lay attentive with my eyes closed through the long night.

If this is only one secret Soran has, I can't even imagine what more there is.

And if this is a secret of the royal family, I can't even imagine what more they are hiding either.

✝✝✝

So we've seen the rooms from Wallie's perspective and he has given us a bit more information. There are five mystery family members, two of which we now know their names; Josette and Annalee. Do you have anymore theories on what happened? And how do you feel about Wallie's worries? He's taking Soran's feelings into very careful consideration as well, good job *pats*

✝Forty-Five✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Soran drops.

With his back against the door and eyes closed, he listens to the drumming of his own heart. Then there's the soft clicking of a lock, signaling Wallie has made it into the first room.

There's a tremor in Soran's hands, one that he examines while clenching and unclenching said hands in his lap.

It has been a long time since anyone new has entered the closed off rooms. Every worker that has ever made it through those doors had been at the estate for over a decade. Soran never trusted anyone that didn't already prove they could handle themselves. If anyone ever broke or stained something in the rooms, Soran would have gone ballistic.

But the only way Wallie may come to truly understand the predicament he's now in is to see the contents of the off limit rooms. As Soran said, they do not hold all the answers to his past, but Wallie is intelligent. He will hopefully come to see what Soran is saying, what Wallie is risking by staying there.

Perhaps Soran should tell him though? In a twisted way, he wants to. He wants to sit Wallie down and tell him every horrendous act that has been done to him or committed by him; watch the way Wallie's face falls into the same disgust and disdain that others have shown before him. Because it's almost sad how Wallie views Soran, how he sees him as anything other than a monster.

There's a reason everyone fears Soran. In all honesty, he fears himself too, what he is, what he can be. Somehow Wallie doesn't, and that's even more terrifying.

"It's fine. He'll see," whispers Soran after he finally stands.

He makes his way back to bed; a bed that will not grant him sleep, especially after what had transpired.

A confession and a kiss.

Soran has read tales of love, but that's all they've ever been; stories. Sometimes he read similar tales to the children, about princes and/or princess' or knights battling dragons to save their lover. Kissing and marriage and happily ever after have always only been stories. Admittedly, as a child, Soran wondered what love was like, wanted that storybook happy ending for himself, but no one ever looked at Soran in the way Wallie does. It's why he can't wrap his head around what happened.

"Because I like you, damn it!"

"Yes. I like you, Soran."

"I know my feelings for you will only continue to grow should I stay."

Feelings. His feelings...for Soran. How? Why? There's almost a feeling of guilt and, of course, pity. It's simply unfathomable. There hasn't been good feelings towards Soran in a long time, and there's certainly never been someone to claim with actual sincerity that they viewed him in a romantic light. It would be a lie to say no one has ever said it. There have been a few individuals that were simply trying to get what they wanted; money, power, immortality.

But not Wallie. Someway, somehow, his feelings are sincere.

Soran's heart jumps at the thought. He presses a hand to his chest.

However, in the back of his mind, he still doesn't believe it. There's a voice, something nagging at his thoughts, a negativity that refuses to accept Wallie's words. After all, how could anyone like Soran? A monster is not worthy of affection.

Soran lays in bed with a scowl. He twists his fingers into the blankets until they rip. Then he sits up.

Wallie's heavy footsteps stop outside the door. Soran passes a lingering glance towards the door, watching Wallie's shadow linger in the hall.

He doesn't knock, only walks away after grabbing his things. Soran wonders what Wallie put together and what he will say come tomorrow, if he is even still here tomorrow.

So that night Soran lay awake listening intently for any sign of Wallie stepping out the front door. But there's nothing. The door doesn't open nor is there anyone in the halls.

There's no denying that Soran is relieved yet troubled all at once. He doesn't know what he wants. On the one hand, Wallie staying at his side makes his heart soar. On the other, it scares him more than anything.

If Wallie chooses to stay, can Soran keep him safe? If he goes, Soran can certainly find a way to keep him out of the grasp of any that will do him harm. However, that means they will never see each other again. Such a thought puts a scowl on his face.

If Wallie stays, will he regret it? Will the day inevitably come that he learns all of Soran's secrets and realizes the truth? Is that something Soran can handle? Or is that something Soran should already be considering doing? Telling the truth, at least Wallie will hear it from him.

Soran can't help but feel he is running in circles. He doesn't know what to do, only what he desperately wants. For Wallie to stay, for them to have some semblance of normalcy. To have the chance to be happy like everyone else.

Is that too much to ask?

It seems so because, only moments later, Soran is reminded once more of how different their worlds are. How there are even more enemies than Wallie likely imagines.

"Good evening, Soran," calls a woman's voice that always holds a cold tone of amusement.

Soran raises his gaze to find eyes as red as his own peering at him through the dark. There's the silhouette of a tall woman barely seen standing in the center of his room. She fades in and out like a mirage but the eyes remain, a brilliant red fixated on Soran.

"Karsissia, I've been expecting to hear from you, although I admit you're far later than expected," says Soran, already dreading what the woman has to say.

"And I admit that even now I'm shocked you help the humans so easily. Haven't you learned your lesson yet?" Karsissia snorts, lifting her hand to rest her fingers beneath her chin. "You always disappoint me, Soran."

"You're incredibly difficult to please so I rather not waste my energy."

Karsissia laughs at that, although the sound is as terrifying as a horrified scream. Even Soran feels his nerves kick up a notch. Karsissia is someone he only mildly annoys since he would never risk actually pissing her off.

"I imagine you are sending this message for a reason?" asks Soran. "You wouldn't waste your time with this vision otherwise."

"Obviously. It's time to have a little chat, face to face. Quelen has already arrived. We expect to see you here by tomorrow night."

"I fear I can't do that."

"Then you best go out and feed until you are strong enough to do so. Otherwise I will come fetch you myself, and I can't promise that I won't make you watch as I drain every useless rat on your estate." Karsissia's eyes flash with clear excitement at the mere idea of such chaos.

"Tomorrow then."

Karsissia smiles. The growl in her voice is replaced with immediate glee, "Excellent! We so look forward to seeing you."

The vision vanishes as quickly as it appeared but the dread lingers.

Soran falls back into the bed with a heavy sigh. Why is it that he could never catch a break?

✝✝✝

A look into how Soran is handling this situation! Poor guy, he's really troubled =/ And he thinks so little of himself, are you surprised by this? What kind of horrendous acts do you think he's referring to from his past? Will he ever tell Wallie and, of course, are you ready to meet the other vampires? ;) Finally, they're going to make an appearance!

✝Forty-Six✝

Wallie P.O.V.

I feel no more prepared waking the following morning; the nerves are as strong as hours prior. Hael is already awake, dressing himself for the day with his back to me. He's unaware of the turmoil currently consuming me. The lights are too bright, footsteps too loud and breaths too shallow. I'm nervous and excited all at once, unsure which I feel more. When my feet touch the floor, my toes curl into the carpet. Reaching under my pillow, I trace over the keys given to me last night. The keys that led to more answers yet somehow even more questions.

So...what now? What am I meant to say? Does Soran even expect me to say anything? And how does he hope I will react based on what I saw? Something tells me he's hoping I'll back off. Even if he's bothered, it's likely safe to assume that he's hoping I'll go and save us both the trouble (although arguably there will be trouble either way, but I digress.)

I watch the door for any sign of movement. There are others passing by, their shadows moving beneath the doorway, but none knock. I'm waiting for Layne or Higra to step in and inform me that I'll be attending to Soran today, but that never happens.

"Better get dressed, Wallie, or you'll be late," says Hael when opening the door.

"Yeah, I'll be right out."

I force a smile until Hael leaves, shutting the door behind him. Once gone, I swiftly change and stash the keys in my pocket. Uncertainty follows me to the lounge where I find no changes to my duties. I'm not sure what I expected; maybe sit in Soran's office all day? Or even a single meeting somewhere? But there's nothing.

Admittedly, I'm a little disappointed but also worried.

Do I go to Soran to talk? Should I wait until he comes to me? I suppose I should see him soon seeing as I have the keys still. Something tells me he doesn't plan to speak about last night though. If he wanted to, I'd be on my way to get his morning tea rather than poking at my breakfast then heading outside to sweep off the sidewalks.

Even while working, I can't stop thinking about the secrets of the locked room. Josette and Annalee were their names, right? What of the other three? I wish to know who they are and why I haven't heard of them. The Makai family history doesn't help seeing as it states the Makai family is dead, save for Soran, of course. But the boy in the painting had a sword with the Makai family crest. Soran wouldn't give him that if he wasn't a Makai, would he? Perhaps I can ask, he may actually answer now that I know of their existence.

But it seems I am not going to be capable of doing that just yet seeing as, when I get back inside, I find Layne preparing with Hael to head into town. Seeing as Layne is normally with Soran at this hour, I use this as an opportunity to poke around a bit.

"Heading into town, Layne?" I ask, smiling when he faces at me.

"Yes. There are a few things we need to pick up for the kitchen."

"What about His Grace?"

"Lord Makai is out. He likely won't be back until this afternoon."

"Out? On his own?"

Soran never goes on his own, nor so suddenly. There are always plans to head out, in which case he takes Layne, and from time to time me.

"He had urgent business to attend to. Why? Did you need to speak with him?" Layne asks, but I don't get how he doesn't find this situation odd. He, out of everyone, must know how weird it is for Soran to leave on his own. Then again, there's a chance he may know why but isn't telling me.

"Ah, no," I lie. "I was just surprised to hear he left without all of us knowing."

"I see, well then, if he returns before I do then please attend to him in my absence." Layne smiles then heads out with Hael right behind.

Well, I guess we're not talking today, or at least not for a while. The keys are still in my pocket. I'm uncertain what to do with them other than wait until Soran's return, whenever that may be. Did he leave just to get away from me? If that's the case, wow, I feel even worse! Maybe I should have talked to him more last night? Perhaps leaving him alone wasn't the best idea...

Luckily, my concerns are pushed to the side when Elamir calls requesting my help with moving some furniture. At least while doing some manual labor I can focus on not breaking my back while walking down the stairs rather than melting my mind from overthinking. However, that lasts all of a few minutes before paranoia decides to rear it's ugly head.

Standing among my co-workers and friends, realization settles in that, like Higra, any one of these people could be watching me. Elamir smiles and laughs at a joke told by Ennith, and Janein soon joins a moment later. She's playfully pinching my arm then ruffling Elamir's hair, the three of them completely oblivious to my inner thoughts.

Is this yet another consequence I'm meant to consider? Should I stay--should I choose to be with Soran, then this paranoia will remain. Among those I call friends will be enemies and I likely won't know until it's too late. To think Soran has been handling such emotions alone all this time...

"Wallie, is something wrong?" asks Elamir. Her voice pulls me from my thoughts. I give a quick smile to the three concerned eyes now focused on me.

"Fine," I lie through my teeth. "I was just thinking about what we're going to have for lunch. I'm starving!"

"Is that really what you were thinking about?" Janein giggles. "With such a serious face, I thought you were contemplating the secrets of the universe."

"Maybe I was but don't wish to tell you for fear that your head will explode."

"You've been hanging around His Grace too much. I swear that's something he would say."

We all laugh, although mine is as forced as the smile I wear. Honestly, it feels like Janein is right. This is as complicated as contemplating the secrets of the universe. When taking this job, I never imagined myself being in a position such as this. I'd say it's funny the routes life takes you on without your consent, but it isn't funny. It's completely fucked.

"Wallie, His Grace is calling for you," says Layne, finding me washing windows with Janein hours later.

While Janein appears troubled, I'm trying my best not to show any emotion. I think it's working but only because I honestly don't know what I'm feeling. Dread? Excitement? Concern? Who knows at this point, but it's after lunch so Soran has been gone for hours, maybe even longer than I think seeing as I have no idea when he left this morning.

"Thanks, Layne, I'll be right there," I respond, stepping down from the ladder to hand off the cleaning equipment to Janein.

She pouts until Layne laughs, "I'll clean the upper half of the windows, Janein."

"Oh thank Aena!" Janein gasps, pressing her hand to her chest. "I hate heights!"

"Yes, yes, we know."

Layne takes over my duties with Janein teasingly telling him all the reasons she adores him. I roll my eyes, at least Janein gave me a good laugh before heading upstairs. Once I'm in front of Soran's office though, the nerves

return full force. I don't know what's going to happen, but stalling isn't making me feel any better. I knock at the door.

"Your Grace?" I call.

My ears ring upon hearing his voice, "Come in, Wallace."

Ok, deep breaths. Deep breaths, Wallie. You got this, whatever this is.

When the door opens, there's something different about Soran. I can't quite put my finger on it, but seeing him somehow puts me on edge. Every joint locks in place. I remain frozen in the doorway, like a mouse that's stumbled upon the house cat. Soran is leaning against his desk. His eyes are the brightest red I've ever seen, two glistening gems in a suddenly grey room, while I swear there's physical energy seeping from his silhouette. The atmosphere is heavier, as if the air itself is pressing down on the world when I take a shaking step forward.

The door slowly shuts behind me. Soran whispers a few words beneath his breath that results in a bright white light that disappears as quickly as it appeared. Blinking my eyes, I notice the sun coming in from the windows is now reflecting against an almost bubble like sheen that's encasing the room. I have no idea what it is or what's happening.

"Is everything...alright?" I ask hesitantly.

Soran ignores my question in order to ask, "Do you trust me?"

"Uh...yes?"

"That doesn't sound very convincing."

"Because I am confused. What's...is something going on?" I take a glance around the room for what might be causing this odd sensation in my gut. While Soran has made me feel on edge before, this is different. It's as if my very instincts are telling me to run.

"And where did you go this morning?" I ask anyways. "Layne said you went out."

"I had urgent business to attend to." Even his voice is off. There's almost a growl to it.

"Yes, that's what he said, but you never go out on your own," I argue.

"This was something I had to do alone."

"Why?"

"You're asking a lot of questions."

"That's because you're doing a lot that is making me question," I grumble while reaching into my pocket to retrieve the keys. Seeing them either reminds Soran of what happened last night or what happened in the past. His shoulders stiffen and he turns away.

I bite my lip while finally stepping across the room to stand in front of him. "Are...are we going to talk about last night?"

Soran quickly snatches the keys from the grasp. They evaporate into thin air. I don't even have time to question it before Soran answers, "No."

I am not at all pleased. This must show on my face because Soran looks away again before I even ask, "No? Why no--"

Soran interrupts me to say, "I'm leaving."

✝✝✝

Psst, guys, you know why Soran is leaving. Um, last chapter, remember? xD Soran certainly doesn't beat around the bush, does he? Poor Wallie, he just wants some answers! Is Soran going to tell him the truth about what's going on? If you absolutely must know, I am ahead on my patreon ;D I also recently had artwork done of Soran and Wallie so, yeah, I'm shamelessly promoting myself. I regret nothing.

https://www.patreon.com/Twoony

✝Forty-Seven✝

"W-What?" I ask, wide-eyed and confused.

"I may be back tomorrow, next week, or next month. I'm not sure."

"W-W-What?" I repeat since, apparently, that's the only word I know now.

"This business is not one I can ignore nor push off. I leave tonight so let me ask again, do you trust me, Wallie?"

"I, uh, yes, obviously."

I don't know if Soran is even aware of the fact that he honestly looks pleased to hear that. His lip twitches back into a small smile for all of a second before disappearing. I choose not to mention it seeing as there's a rather pressing matter at the moment.

"You're being very confusing right now," I say. "Not to mention, are we really not going to talk about last night?"

"Wallace--"

"We kissed, Soran. Not some accidental peck on the cheek but full on make out mode."

"No need to describe it."

"And I saw what was in the rooms!" I gesture behind me. The memory of what was in them has my arms going limp at my side. Soran doesn't appear much different, continuing to avoid my gaze.

"Your family," I whisper, the words coming out in a shuttered breath. "I know the late Emperor Elyon killed his children and there's no record of anyone other than you ever being here. Who are they really? What happened to them?"

"You're intelligent enough to take a guess."

"A guess isn't truth until you have all the facts."

Soran snorts, but he doesn't sound annoyed. Pressing his hands to the desk, Soran responds with his gaze on the ground, "So you're aware."

"Aware of what?"

"The consequences should you stay. It isn't just the royals that will come for you."

My throat tightens.

"And should I not be here to keep you safe, like now, you won't just be killed. It will be as if you never existed."

"How will leaving change that?" I ask, standing firm even when Soran clicks his tongue in obvious annoyance.

So he did want me to back off on my own, huh? Even if I understand, that doesn't stop me from getting a little peeved about all this. We're running in circles at this point.

"Cathen already suspects us. He wouldn't have approached me otherwise. And if he knows, others likely do as well. We both know there are spies all around us, nothing here is secret." I glance at the bubble around us. "Save maybe this conversation, I'm guessing?"

Soran hums in response. I'm tempted to ask why it isn't normally up if this bubble thing is sound proof, but I'll save that for another day.

Now it's my turn to watch Soran for a reaction, which he gives by crossing his arms defensively as I argue, "If I leave, what then? You won't be with me either, so I'll still be unsafe. Even if I thought it would be for the best too, the more I think about it the more I realize that to be untrue."

"I know someone that owes me a favor. They can take you far away, someplace safe," Soran says, although his brows furrow, like he's annoyed

at the mere thought of this person. "And keep you hidden long enough to settle in."

"So I'm meant to start a new life...again? What if this new home doesn't pan out? Will I have to pick up and leave? Will this go on for the rest of my life or until the royals get bored?"

"I don't know, Wallace, but would you rather move around or die?"

"If I'm in as much danger out there as I am here then at least here I have you."

Soran doesn't respond. He only matches my strong gaze with his own. We stand here for some time, neither backing down. Then Soran pulls a small metal container from his pocket. It looks like what most carry face powder in, but when he pops it open there's black ash inside.

"We will discuss this later," says Soran causing me to groan. "I have little time before I must leave."

"Seriously, right now? Why?!" I throw my arms in the air. "What's going on?"

"Later, Wallace. Trust me."

Soran dips his fingers into the black powder. With one hand, he grips my chin and the other covered now in black draws a shape on my forehead.

"What are you doing?" I ask, watching Soran concentrate on his work. He's now tracing lines down the side of my face to my cheeks. "I swear, if this is some type of spell to wipe my memory or something--"

"So you don't trust me?" He hums, although he may think he doesn't look bothered, I definitely catch on to the sudden tightening of his jaw.

"Why do you immediately get defensive?" I grumble.

"It's in my nature."

"You're acting weird so you can't blame me for worrying."

"Why worry so much over this when there are more pressing matters?"

"I thought we were saving that conversation for later. Are we going to talk more about last night then?"

Soran's silence is answer enough. He's now made it to my neck. I have no idea what he's doing, but now it's starting to make me blush. Feeling his slim fingers and pointed nails tracing down my neck sends a shiver through me. I have to look away, take a deep breath to steady my rapidly beating heart, which doesn't help in the least.

Next are my hands, which are trembling slightly in his cold grasp. I worry he may think it has to do with fright. That certainly is not the case. My heart is beating in my throat. His hands hold mine gently as he draws two spheres within a triangle and three lines beneath it reaching up to my elbow. Another shiver accompanies the touch, then another when he mirrors the same symbols on my opposing arm. When his eyes are so fixated on me, I can't deny that it doesn't make my toes curl.

He finally lets go, I step away, hoping to conceal my blush by avoiding his eyes but he has to see it. I know my blush is obvious seeing as my face is burning.

"W-What is this?" I ask, holding up my arms and admiring the odd symbols.

"A binding spell," answers Soran while putting the container away. He's wiping the remnants from his fingers with a handkerchief. "I don't normally have the ability to call forth my familiar, but I've made preparations for this. As such, I shall bind him to you for protection while I'm gone."

"F-Familiar? Like a...magical pet?"

Soran snorts. "Yes, like a magical pet, Wallie."

"I don't appreciate your condescending tone," I growl. "I am neither a vampire nor a mage so I don't know what exactly a familiar is other than some type of magical pet!"

"Oh no, you're pretty spot on, but I suggest you not say that in front of Malatis. He won't appreciate it."

"Malatis? Is that the familiars name? What is he? A wolf? A tiger?!" I gasp. "Is he a dragon?"

Soran shakes his head. Rather than answering me, he goes on to say, "This will hurt for a few moments so I'll ask again, do you trust me?"

"You keep asking but my answer isn't going to change so, go on. I'm ready." I take a shaking breath. "I think."

Soran hesitates. That only worries me more, but I understand why the moment after Soran creates a triangle shape with his hands. His eyes glaze over black as harsh, broken words pass swiftly through his lips. It feels as if those words surround me, beat against the inside of my head then constrict me until my arms are pinned to my side. The air is zapped from my lungs, along with the strength in my body that simply drops to its knees while I gasp, wide-eyed at the ceiling.

It burns. Where the marks are is a searing pain that slowly moves up my arms to my chest. I don't know how much time passes, only that it feels like an eternity.

Then it's only warm, as if everything simply settled into comfort. I take in a heaping breath that brings tears to my eyes. Soran is already kneeling next to me, hands on my shoulders with a concerned gaze.

"Do you feel alright?" He asks, gently stroking my cheek that immediately leans into his touch.

Although the pain was intense, now there's nothing. I can barely remember what it felt like and now, I can't describe it, but I feel different.

"W-What was that?" I ask, allowing Soran to guide me to the couch. I notice the marking are gone on my arms as if they were never there to begin with. I imagine the glyphs on my face have vanished too.

My legs haven't caught up with reality yet though. They're still shaking so standing obviously isn't an option. But when I take a seat, I think I have my answer as I find myself staring at a winged creature sitting next to where I once was.

Malatis, I'm guessing, is watching me with wide green eyes with thin golden slits as his pupils. I would say he's a cat, only he's the size of a couch with legs and talons like an eagle and feathered wings. His long tail rests idly next to him, but the stinger at the tip is fearsome even when resting. Fangs slip past his lips and his long ears twitch after every noise. His fur is black as night while his wings are an off gray that matches his legs.

"This is Malatis, my familiar," says Soran.

Malatis steps forward to press his head against Soran's arm. I'm slightly surprised to hear the creature purr so loudly that I feel it rumbling in my own chest. Soran caresses Malatis' head lovingly, running his fingers through thick fur.

Soran explains before I can even ask anything, "Worry not about keeping him out of sight, the binding spell I used is so that you may call him when in need. When he isn't needed, he'll return."

"Return where?"

"You really know absolutely nothing of magic."

"Are you surprised?" I ask, watching Malatis nestle against Soran's side like he was a mere house cat rather than a giant killing machine. "I didn't even know how to read until I came here."

Soran snickers.

"To put it simply, familiars are not of our world," he says. "They exist on another plane known as The Veil. Once it was believed Aena and Tethros resided alongside them but there's no proof. Mages can pass into The Veil for short periods of time where they have the chance to catch and bind a familiar. Typically these familiars are like Malatis, a form of demon that does not exist in our plane. This binding spell allows us to call for them when needed and send them back with ease."

"And you performed this binding spell on me? But I know nothing of magic. I know lumen resides in all of us, but I don't have the power that mages do," I swiftly argue, still confused on how this works.

"Malatis still answers and pulls power from me. The binding spell has only made it so that he may find you when you're in need. Should you be in danger, he'll protect you until my return."

Soran suddenly stands. Malatis steps back, now watching me with his head tilted to the side. His ears flick then he licks at his paw, seemingly uncaring of my presence. Well, he's as prissy as his owner. I'm not surprised.

"You're not to leave the estate while I'm gone," Soran adds, stepping around Malatis to head for the door. "I've put up a few defenses that should deter any pests so it is safest to remain indoors."

"And what if I'm given orders to leave?" I ask.

"Then know the ones that gave it are untrustworthy since I've given strict orders that you're not to leave the estate."

"I'm starting to feel like a princess locked away in a tower," I grumble, arms crossed until I can practically read Soran's expression that's already saying; see, I told you there would be consequences to staying.

I wave off his concern before he can make a snide remark. "Fine, I'll stay here, but will you at least tell me where you're going and why so suddenly?"

"It's best you not know."

"Then can we at least make a deal to actually talk after you've returned?"

Soran turns away, hesitating at the door. I walk over to him, attempting to peer at his face but he moves so his back is to me.

"So be it," he replies softly. "We'll speak more when I return."

Before he can open the door, I take a chance to wrap my arms around his waist. Soran freezes. I rest my chin atop his shoulder, taking a deep breath that smells of a mixture of pine and warm tea. Somehow that's annoyingly fitting. I chuckle, holding a little tighter even if Soran hasn't responded to the touch.

Sadly, the moment is fleeting.

Soran brushes me aside. I'm reminded of our night on the terrace, when he cast my hand aside. There's a familiar look in his eyes, the one of confusion and concern. Once more, he's attempting to put distance between us even if it's futile. Admittedly, I feel a little guilty, like I'm forcing myself onto him. There's nothing that can be said though. Soran is already stepping out of the office, glancing back at me one last time.

"Don't cause trouble while I'm gone," he says.

"The only troublemaker here is you."

At least that gets a smirk out of him, but that's the last I see of him.

The door shuts and his footsteps quiet until, when I step out of the office, he's nowhere in sight. Neither is Malatis when I turn around. I'm alone in the hall, rubbing my arm nervously.

Somehow, Soran has added even more questions to my never ending list. Let's hope it's only a few days and not a month that he's gone.

✝✝✝

Soran is going to meet the other vampires and Wallie is left with the familiar, oh geez! Finally time to meet the other vampires though, hope

ya like it~ what could possibly happen next? ^^

✝Forty-Eight✝

Third Person P.O.V.

The Makai estate is older than Soran himself, so if Soran has secrets then so does the estate. The first isn't a secret to everyone. Those such as the king, Lord Movell, and Lady Connte know of its existence; Soran's laboratory where he continues his research into The Unborn. However, there is another, a room that only Soran knows of for he destroyed the blueprints to the estate long ago. None other than him are alive that know of this secret.

In the library there are a great deal of oddities; endless shelving from one side to the next filled with knowledge. A great stone fireplace rests on the farside of the room with plush deep green couches that one can take a long nap in. The right wall is made up mostly of a stained glass window with the Makai house sigil; a burning shield with two crossed swords, reaching from floor to ceiling. A truly beautiful and intricate room that holds a secret to even more knowledge that only Soran has access to.

The stained glass window glistens bright in the sunlight. Soran stands before it, pressing the tip of his finger to the window while tracing the words; *the end is always near.* The Makai ancestors often quoted such a phrase before battle, reminding themselves that death was always near and not to fear it, or so Soran was told. The builders must have found the quote intriguing seeing as they enforced the window with magic. The sun warms the words until they are a soft white light on the window.

Soran steps aside, watching the light hit the center of the room where a circular mural rests. The room groans softly when the floor sinks, revealing a stone stairwell into the depths. Soran slips below with torch in hand to light his way when the entrance locks behind him.

The torches brighten as soon as Soran steps into the long and wide room beneath the mansion. There's dust in the air, floating through the warm firelight. Similar to his laboratory, this room is also filled with the world's

oddities. There are enchanting tables, only of a much deeper and darker magic, resting on the far side of the room, some of stone and some of wood. Books line the shelves, books that are so rare even the royal family do not own them. Some are chained and locked tight, rattling when Soran passes them.

At the center of the room is glyph; a flame resting in the center of a large sphere. Beneath and above that flame are two curved lines that grow past the sphere. To the left and right are triangles with two spheres within them. The moment Soran steps on the glyph, the chipped white paint flashes a brilliant purple. Then the paint returns to what it once was; a clean white that hadn't been eaten away by time.

This is the room the spies are looking for. This is what the royals, and many others, wish to get their hands on. The knowledge Soran has of vilis, of vampires, of cursed books that were outlawed and burned by the Baylor's own ancestors centuries ago; Soran has many of them. Countless forbidden text and knowledge that he's been hiding from all that he could. Once he, too, was interested in it. But times change and he no longer wishes to delve into the consuming void.

Sadly, today will have to be an exception.

Soran lines the circle with candles and glyphs for each one. The entire time he works, he chants a broken language that casts an eerie purple hue to the room. Even the flames lessen until they snuff themselves out. Only the glyph remains, a brilliant violet that pulses as if it has a heartbeat of its own.

When Soran stands at the center, the entire room is consumed with sparks of purple. The candles roar higher with a searing black firelight. Soran's eyes go black, his veins pulse beneath his skin then Soran thinks of a single person and speaks their name, "Karsissia O'Shear."

He vanishes into darkness.

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Soran appears in the same glyph but a vastly different environment.
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The Bloody Keep is what Karsissia calls her castle of red stone built into the mountain side. The spires reach high into clouds as black as night. Lightning rains from above, illuminating the red stones as deep and rich as blood. Arched windows and passageways with long, thin, and spiral peeks reach into the sky like claws. It makes the Makai estate look like a mere shack.

Soran stands within a half dome room. The outlook is an entire wall and ceiling made of windows and iron bars. Peering through the windows, one sees the land of Yvlacna, or rather the decaying land of Yvlacna. There is but harsh deep red and brown sand reaching as far as the eye can see. Soran hoped to never return yet he finds himself in the familiar red keep. A red keep with far more knowledge than Soran's own. There are tapestries and mechanical marvels hanging from walls and ceiling. Shelves upon shelves of books and tables upon tables of enchantment with crackling flames in jars and pulsating liquid.

What unsettles Soran most though is not the castle itself, but rather those within.

Two humans, or rather what's left of them, are working mindlessly within the enchanting room. Both have shaved heads, revealing gruesome scars along their scalp. Their eyes are a dull white, mindless, with drool slipping past bruised lips. Both move sluggishly, clean mindlessly, and don't even acknowledge Soran when he passes. He does his best not to acknowledge them either. There's nothing he can do for them anyways.

"Lord Makai," speaks a shivering man, at least he was once a man, beneath navy robes. His skin resembles rusted leather, fingers skeletal but long, black talons hang from their tips. An Unborn with a sly grin behind cracked lips and sharpened teeth that goes by the name of Belrox. "Our Queen has been waiting anxiously for your arrival."

"I'm sure she has."

Belrox snickers. The sound catches in the back of his throat; harsh and rough. He gestures behind him with a bow, "This way, My Lord."

Soran follows Belrox through the halls of The Bloody Keep. Although it has been centuries and some factors have clearly changed, the overall atmosphere remained the same. The halls are long and narrow with towering ceilings so that every step echoes in the vast darkness. The stone in which it's carved is sturdy and cold, like its master. There are iron bars twisted into stone and resting along stairwells.

What is most unsettling are the trophies Karsissia has kept and mounted throughout the castle. Bones of the dead, of those tortured and murdered within these walls. Sculptures, furniture, even chandeliers with melting candles have been created from clean, white bones to remind all what happens when Karsissia is crossed, or simply bored. Skulls of kings to commoners alike line the halls, though some appear to be fresh, so fresh that the blood is still dripping from their decaying skin.

Belrox leads Soran to the great hall, another long and narrow passage that surpasses any king's throne room. Stone columns hold up the pointed ceiling. Within the columns are skulls resting atop their remains, all placed in a viewable tomb. At the center of the room is a black granite table with three chairs but room for much more. Karsissia and Quelen are there, but not alone. There's a mortal girl on the table, legs and arms snapped like twigs so she can but lay there and wait for the inevitable.

"Soran," calls Karsissia from the head of the table. She stands with a beaming smile, arms outstretched in welcoming. "Thank you, Belrox, for retrieving him."

Belrox bows. He has not entered the great hall, and he won't. Karsissia would never allow him to dine anywhere near them.

"Come, have a seat," says Karissia, with an elegant wave of her clawed hand.

Karsissia has always held an air of elegance even when her torturous nature is seen. Her long red hair rests in curls to her waist while her eyes are far brighter crimson than Quelen or Soran's. Her lips match, a bloody red resting against skin as white as snow. The gown she wears is that of a Queen's, embroidered with ruby gems atop diamonds encircling her waist

and neck. The fabric reaches to the floor, leaving a trail behind her. Atop her head is a circlet, silver in nature with a brilliant ruby at the center.

Karsissia has never had an issue flaunting her position either.

Behind the eldest vampire are two more mortals strapped to wooden posts, gagged and bound. When one attempts to scream, Karsissia slaps him so hard that the snapping of his jaw echoes in the hall.

"I apologize for the noise," she says with a heavy sigh, flicking her long red hair over a thin shoulder. "They'll be quiet soon enough. Sit. We've been waiting for you."

"My apologies for keeping you waiting," says Soran when slowly taking a seat across from Quelen.

Unlike Soran, Quelen doesn't come across as the least bit bothered. Not as excited as Karsissia either, rather neutral, as usual. His deep brown skin has been mostly covered in black ink so the red of his eyes stand out even more. His clothes are not as garrish as Karsissia's or expensive as Soran's, but rather normal leather of a traveler. There are belts and daggers and swords, a black cloak with a deep hood and a brown tunic. Both his feet rest in heavy boots atop the table, chair leaning back while he licks remnants of blood from his fingertips.

Quelen greets Soran with a nod. "It's been a while."

Soran returns the gesture. "It sure has, which has me curious as to why we've been summoned."

"Straight to the point, as always," Karissis giggles, tracing her nail along the jawline of the young girl resting before them. She whimpers in terror, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I think it's best we eat first." Karsissia smiles at Soran. "What do you say? Should we skin her first?"

The girl whimpers out a plea that is ignored.

"If you're going to torture them then I will happily leave until you are finished," says Soran.

Karsissia suddenly slams Soran's face against the table. He grunts in shock, holding his nose that's now dripping blood. Karsissia's expression hasn't changed though when she says, "I decide whether you stay or go, Soran."

"Of course. My apologies."

"That's twice you've apologized and twice you haven't really meant it." Karsissia sighs. "You've always been the disappointment."

Soran snaps his nose back into place. It heals in mere seconds. Quelen watches from across the table, catching Soran's eye for a brief moment then turning away.

"Quelen is the only child that's any fun." Karsissia reaches out to gently caress his cheek. "But seeing as it has been so long since we've all been together, I'll humor you." She slits the girl's throat in one quick motion. There's only a few seconds of struggle before she rests idly on the table, eyes growing duller by the second.

"You take care of the other two then since you insist they not suffer." Karsissia huffs before tearing into the throat of her latest victim.

Soran rather not watch her feed anyways so he follows the orders given. Soon, all three mortals are dead. Their corpses are tossed aside afterwards, their blood staining the table until two of Karsissia's mindless servants stumble into the room to clean up the mess.

✝✝✝

So we know that Soran does have a secret room to all but himself, but we don't know more than that. And you've met the other vampires! What do you think of Karsissia and Quelen based on this brief meeting? Did you expect Soran to be treated this way by them? Why do you think Karsissia sees him as a disappointment? Next chapter will be a continuation of this so you'll see more of them, don't worry ;)

P.S. Check out my story —K if you want a cute read about secretive pen pals :)

✝Forty-Nine✝

Third Person P.O.V

"Why have you called us here, my queen?" Quelen finally questions, resting his elbows against the table. "It is unlike you to summon us so urgently."

"There have been troubling matters of late. Matters which Soran is aware of." Karsissia glances to him, causing the youngest vampire to hum in response.

"You mean The Unborn gathering? Is it truly that troubling?" He asks.

"It is when they are meddling in things they shouldn't."

"What things?"

"You tell me. You've been assisting the mortals in their research."

"I have barely given them any intel," Soran hisses, recalling the incident with Prince Baylor that put a quick stop to the bit of assistance he was giving. "And have since stopped giving them any. They pissed me off."

Quelen shakes his head in disapproval. "You should have learned by now, Soran. They will never see you as one of their own. Why do you keep trying?"

"I'm not trying to be accepted by them. I'm simply not going to butcher them as I please-" Soran glances to a smirking Karsissia, smirking as if she won a prize. "-nor will I let them run me out of my own home so that I simply travel the world for centuries on end." He looks to Quelen next. "I will keep my home and my position and the humans will have to deal with that."

"Oh yes, how truly awful for them." Karsissia rolls her eyes, sarcasm dripping from her words. "But we're not here to lecture the young one."

Soran purses his lips. Quelen chuckles.

"We're here to speak of The Unborn and their fruitless, but relentless attempts to bring about another vampire."

That has both Soran and Quelen growing stiff. When the men's gaze meet, there's a tension between them that only they sense. Quelen begins to tap his fingers against the table until he tightens his hand into a fist.

"They have been trying since they've known of your existence," Quelen argues. "They've always failed. Why are you concerned about them now?"

"Because they are the only ones actually capable of bringing about another vampire. They're getting too close for comfort," she answers. "You must notice it too, Soran. You've inspected a few corpses, have you not?"

Soran nods. "The vilis within them was pure, as if plucked from Tethros' hand. Nothing like our own or anything seen in our plane."

"I've let them meddle for far too long." Karsissia gnaws at the tip of her thumb. "They've never been more than some halfwit sorcerer's playing with a power they couldn't comprehend. Now they're reaching into our domain, a domain that can bring about calamity to all, possibly even to us."

"You wish us to do something about it then?" asks Soran.

"Yes. We must all do our part; figure out how they've come by this new knowledge then snuff it out before the fire spreads."

"You could do that yourself, far better and more efficiently than us."

"Speak for yourself," says Quelen when leaning forward with a teasing grin. "I heard you had to gorge yourself just to come here."

"I don't see a reason to feed as much as the two of you."

"Hunger, obviously." Quelen gives Soran a once over, sneering when he finished. "Don't even pretend like you aren't always starving."

Soran's gaze narrows; a hidden implication that has Quelen turning away. Soran ignores Quelen in order to ask, "Do you wish us to attack The Unborn?"

"If I were going to attack them then I'd wipe them all out on my own so no. We don't want the mortals thinking The Unborn are onto something," Karsissia replies. "Since you're incapable of keeping up with us-"

Again, Soran purses his lips and Quelen chuckles.

"Quelen and I will visit their camp in secret. We cannot risk The Unborn learning of our involvement either. Let them continue to believe they are grasping at nothing. We'll spend some time investigating what exactly has changed to have led them so far." Karsissia sends Quelen a wide smile that he mirrors. "Then a horrible accident will befall their camp, resulting in the loss of some possible ancient texts. There will be a few deaths, a few missing and those missing will be brought back to our young one." Karsissia pinches Soran's cheek like she's scolding a child. "At least research is one thing you're better at than us."

"I am honored to be of assistance."

"No need for sarcasm. I am aware you would rather not be here." Karsissia presses a hand over her chest. "You hurt us, truly."

"How long must we stay?"

"In such a hurry to go home. Here I thought you would grow tired of that wretched place. After all, your so-called family was butchered there."

Soran glares at Karsissia, uncaring of whether or not she's ok with it. Since he hasn't lost his head, and she's grinning ear to ear, she must not care all that much.

"I'm teasing you, young one. Stop being so sensitive." Karsissia stands. "I will not keep you from your precious mortals for long, just enough to get things started on our end."

"You too, Quelen." Karsissia nods to him. "We work together now, but afterwards, I expect you to only check in on their camp. Anything you find, anything you take will be brought back to me first then our little scientist will look into it."

Quelen bows his head. "As you wish, My Queen."

"Good. We leave tonight." Karsissia steps behind Soran, dragging her hand across his back that stiffens at the touch. "Make yourself at home, young one. We'll return in a few days."

With that, Karsissia leaves, taking only a little of the tension with her. And once gone, once Quelen and Soran are certain she is no longer listening, the young one smirks.

"Imagine who would be the disappointment if Karsissia learned the truth," says Soran, beaming at the narrowed glare from Quelen. "That her favorite so-called child got himself trapped by some lowly Unborn and had to ask the young one for help to avoid upsetting the queen."

"Soran," Quelen hisses in warning. "Do not bring that up here. If she hears-
"

"She'd be most disappointed, especially in you. I imagine the punishment would be quite severe."

Quelen's chair is thrown across the room by the sheer speed of his movements. He's at Soran's side in the blink of an eye whereas Soran slowly stands while adjusting his waist coast, uncaring of Quelen's murderous gaze. Quelen stands at least a head higher, but in that instance, he was somehow far smaller.

"Fear not. I don't plan to tell," says Soran. "Besides, there's more risk of an accidental discovery. The Unborn's progress may have to do with your ridiculous mishap."

"My mishap?" Quelen snorts, each word snarled out between his clenched teeth. "The only reason the Unborn managed to trap me was because of

your stupidity."

Soran rolls his eyes.

"Allowing the mortals to experiment on you, do you even know how much information they retrieved from you, or how much they have managed to keep?"

"I burned their archives to the ground long ago-"

"Did you?"

Soran quiets, turning away when Quelen speaks confidently, "You went on a rampage and now hope that in your manic state you somehow managed to salvage the situation. The situation that you-" Quelen jammed his finger into Soran's chest. "Willing allowed."

Soran bites the inside of his cheek until it bleeds. "Fine. Let's say the Baylor's have maintained their records, do you think they shared any of that information? Their main mission is to become one of us or rid the world of us themselves. They wouldn't dare offer up any truths."

"Who said they offered? The Unborn are intelligent whether we all wish to believe it or not. They could get their hands on some old records if they really wanted to."

"By that logic they could have caught you because of their own intelligence."

It's Quelen's turn to roll his eyes, followed by him running a hand down his face in exhaustion and annoyance. Quelen gives up, or at least pretends to. "Why now then? They caught me nearly two hundred years ago."

"Probably took them this long to piece anything together. Even we know very little about how vampires are made."

Quelen stands a little taller when he nods. "Enough of this. Karsissia and I will learn more tonight so long as you keep your trap shut."

"My lips are sealed."

Quelen takes that as time to leave, dragging his nails across the table until Soran suddenly says, "Under one condition."

That has Quelen stopping in his tracks, facing Soran with murderous intent. In this moment, Soran knows to speak swiftly before Quelen teaches him an incredibly painful lesson. Regardless of what Soran knows, Quelen is as fearsome as Karsissia when he wants to be, and far stronger than Soran.

"I have a request, a favor for the assistance given," says Soran. "I'll keep your secret and you'll keep one of mine. How does that sound?"

Quelen raises a brow. "What kind of secret?"

✝✝✝

This certainly wasn't as long as last chapter but was actually heavier. Quite a lot of hints dropped! First off, why do you think even Karsissia and Quelen don't want more vampires? Could Quelen's capture really have helped them get far in their research? What did Quelen mean by Soran "letting" humans experiment on him and when could this have possibly happened? And, oh, a hint towards the making of vampires--only the Unborn are capable of it. A big chapter indeed ;)

✝Fifty✝

Warning: The latter half of this chapter gets dark.

Wallie P.O.V.

Three days have passed since Soran's departure. Nothing out of the ordinary has transpired. Am I relieved? Nope. Nothing happening is almost more frightening than something happening. This feels like the calm before the storm, waiting patiently for chaos to arrive.

Knowing Malatis is capable of helping eases the nerves, kind of. Not seeing the winged creature though leaves me a little on edge. I would prefer if he were walking about with me, but I understand why he isn't. At least I think I do. Soran may not want others to know he has a familiar. I sure as hell didn't know!

So if he has one, does that mean the royals do too? What about the High Priest and Grand Knight? Should they wish to send theirs, can Malatis handle them on his own? Soran did mention setting up the necessary precautions before departing. What those are other than Malatis, I don't know. Soran and I are going to have to have a long talk when he returns. He knows what we're up against but I don't, not fully.

To top it all off, there has been no word from Soran either. Where he is and what he's doing seems to be beyond any of us, but I feel as if I'm the only one that truly cares. Others go about their business as per usual. Some appear even thrilled that Soran is gone, although I don't see why. When was the last time he caused a scene? Can't remember, which means it's been a while! Seems others are choosing not to remember; they rather hate on him while he isn't here. I try not to listen to any of it, doing my work diligently while impatiently waiting for his return.

He better keep his promise too. We can't keep avoiding our situation. That will only make everything worse. Which is saying a lot since the situation is

already dire, dire enough to warrant Soran giving me his familiar...or sharing it? Still not entirely sure how that works, which has me questioning more about magic in general. Although I've seen it used more often on the streets in Vashna, there wasn't much of it back home.

In Chandri there was a healer, nothing more, and she used magic with incantations. Soran though, he didn't speak a word the few times I witnessed magic from him. Flung me out the door with a flick of his wrist, literally, not a single chant. I haven't anyone else to compare to either seeing as everything was done by hand in Chandri. People were too poor and lacked basic education to tap into something as natural as magic.

Seeing as I'm stuck at the mansion, I decide to give looking into magic a try. The library is a good place to start so, after work on the third day, I go there. I end up finding a book titled; *Lumen and Vilis, Two Parts of a Whole.*

There's no one else in the library so I take a seat in front of the fireplace. The first chapter begins with a brief break down of what lumen and vilis is. Even I know that; lumen comes from Aena and her life giving light, vilis comes from Tethros and his consuming dark chaos. Suppose "two parts of a whole" makes sense since it doesn't take a genius to guess that there needs to be a balance. With light comes darkness and with darkness light, the world cannot exist without both, as fearsome as vilis is.

Sadly, the text is far too advanced for me. Do they have a Lumen and Vilis for dumbies handbook?

The next chapter I struggle to make through, but I already know more than I once did. Apparently, lumen is not just something that courses through humans. Lumen runs through everything, from air to water to animals to even objects such as weapons and homes. While stationary objects have more to do with the memory of lumen, such as the memory or feelings of those that were creating it at the time; lumen within living beings is ever changing and evolving along with us.

Vilis, however, is rarely discussed in the first chapter. The most I get is that it's a magic that consumes rather than gives, think of it as fire. A dark fire

that takes away, but in doing so allows more to grow, and that doesn't sound nearly as frightening as some make it out to be. Soran probably knows far more than any of the books in here though. I do hope he'll talk to me about magic when he returns. At the rate I'm reading, it'll take me a full year to comprehend this monstrosity. Even with the difficult reading though, I take the book downstairs with me.

"What's that?" asks Hael when he sees me return to our room with a book in hand.

"I wanted to learn a bit more about lumen and vilis so I nabbed it from the library. It's a bit too advanced for me so it's gonna take a while to read."

Hael sounds baffled when asking, "Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why are you suddenly interested?"

"I thought you of all people would understand," I laugh. Taking a seat on my bed, I place the book on my bedside table. "You're always trying to learn more."

"Not about magic."

I cock a brow in honest surprise. "Why not? Somehow it's otherworldly although it technically isn't. I think it's fascinating. If I had the chance to learn more while back home, I certainly would have done so."

"That's the thing, isn't it?" Hael asks, swinging his legs off the bed to face me. "Otherworldly, for those like us it certainly is. Although we're all born with the capability to learn and perform magic, there are those more attuned to it and they are devoured by The Academy to join as priests or knights regardless of their own wishes."

"I always thought people joined of their own accord?"

"Oh yes, it is an honor above all else to serve the great Goddess," Hael speaks dryly. "I knew a girl in my childhood that was dragged from her

home after it was discovered she could perform healing spells without proper teaching. And then there are those that buy their way in." Hael pinches then rubs his fingers together. "If you have a deep enough pocket, you can buy the honor to learn. And it's pretty well known that there are more seats bought than earned."

"Wouldn't it be better for The Academy and our kingdom to have more that earn their position? We want the best of the best defending us, should we ever need them."

"The best of the best for those in power. They rather know they've got magic users on their side should things ever go bad. Because of that, I've never been all that interested in magic." Hael suddenly stands to dig about in one of the trunks beneath his bed. He retrieves some newspaper, whispering to himself how glad he is to have kept them.

"Here," he says while handing them to me. "There's some articles in there talking about The Academy. Feels like I'm always telling you about Vashna, it's about time you know where to look." Hael also grabs some journals of writers he likes going over the in's and out's of the city to hand to me. "Go through what you can if you're actually that interested. Better to know what's going on around here before you try leaving."

"Leaving?" I ask. "Who?"

"You." Hael nods when returning to his spot on the bed. "Or all of us, eventually. Not many last here, I mean, you are planning on leaving after getting some experience, right?"

"Uh..." I attempt to change the subject. "Do you plan to leave?"

"Of course. I've got five years under my belt now. I'll probably start searching for another to serve soon."

Five years.

My stomach drops.

Hael is flipping through the pages of another book, unaware of my worried eyes. Did he say that on purpose? Is it meant as a warning? Please tell me Hael isn't involved with the royals. I want to believe he's not but now, in the back of my mind, I know the possibility will always linger. Each day I'm learning a bit more about how alone Soran really is because, soon, I think I won't be much different.

"Thanks...for the reading," I say, holding up what Hael gave to me. He nods, never once tearing his eyes from the page.

"Goodnight," I add, although it's still early. I get another nod followed by the sound of Hael turning a page.

✝✝✝

On the fourth night of Soran's absence, I have a nightmare that startles me awake. I pass it off as coming from the constant worrying. But the following evening the nightmare returns, and by the third night in a row, I know something is up. Malatis has made no appearance though, leaving me to pass out from exhaustion and sink into the nightmare once more.

I "wake up" in this dream, only I'm not me. I'm a child, a child with a face I do not know. All I know is that I'm cold, dirty, hungry, and scared. My skin is stained red and brown, clothes but thin brown rags clinging to a thin frame. When I hold up my hands, I fear the skin will rip from the tension, it barely clings to my bones. My ribs are visible and stomach bloated, always aching with an indescribable hunger that itches and claws. At least, I think it is. It feels like I know that's what I'm feeling yet I'm not feeling it. I can't explain the odd sensations or the dreams or the way the dream goes a little further every night.

Tonight, like the ones before, I crawl about a cell made of cold, cracked stone. There is nothing but straw and dirt beneath my scraped knees. In the corner is a single lantern that flickers with a light that barely chases away the darkness. On the walls I scratch another mark until the wall is nearly covered in tick marks. To my right is an iron door, one that is opened by a woman that brings only fear and pain. This woman has a name I do not know yet the very sight of her inflicts terror. She wears an outfit similar to a

priest; gray robes with a silver tassel around a wide waist. A cowl is thrown over her head, shielding golden locks that are barely visible peeking out from around her ears.

"Recite our Goddess' words," she hisses. Thin blue eyes that glare with visceral hatred and disgust narrow when I do not respond. Pain soon follows after a leather strap cracks against my back. I never hear "my" voice though. It's always a silent scream in the dark.

"Recite our Goddess' words," she orders and I go about rocking in place, hands clutched to my chest as the words spill out from memory. Though I imagine everything is right, she does not smile, only leaves with an order. "Recite them until I return."

Oddly enough, I do exactly as I'm told, continuing to rock in place. I fear what comes next. I fear how far this dream will go. I don't want to watch the men that come barging into the room later. They wear black robes, hoods up so only their grotesque smiles show beneath the shadow. I think I'm screaming, at least, I would suspect so as my legs thrash about when they drag me away.

The halls are long and narrow, stone harshly chipped back with torches locked in iron clasps lighting the way. The orange light would feel warm but in this instance, it only brings fear. Fear of these monsters dragging me to a hell I cannot possibly fathom. Their grip is tight, uncaring and cold. Their nails pierce my skin, draws blood that trickles down my arms.

My cell grows further and further away in the distance but there are others. Other iron doors with shouting prisoners banging against their confinement. Some peer out through a slit in the door, bloodshot eyes meeting my own. I'm more scared of those holding me than those in the cells. This is where the previous dream stopped, as I'm being dragged by my arms across a cold stone floor.

Unfortunately, the dream continues a little further as it has been doing.

There's a click of a lock behind me followed by screeching of old hinges. After being dragged through a door, my assumption of being taken to hell is

proven correct. Lining the walls of this new room are instruments of torture. There are blood stained weapons clasped to stone walls, prisoners hanging either lifelessly or in horrified desperation from cages and racks like animals. I suspect to join them.

Only the brutes dragging me suddenly spin me around to face my fate, which actually has me wishing to hang from the ceiling instead.

Before me rests an iron cage with a single door that leads into a pit of flames. Those flames roar high and hot even from a distance. They call to devour whatever is given to them. The flames almost reach out like a ghostly hand. The men force me closer, faster and faster no matter how much I twist and turn in their grasp. I must be screaming or pleading but, once again, I do not hear my voice, only the flames and their crooked laughter.

The fire is right in front of us now. They halt, one holding the back of my neck as the other opens the door. Everything is still for a moment and I honestly believe maybe, just maybe, this is only meant to scare me.

Then they push me into the flames that quickly overtake my vision.

This is the only time I hear "my" voice; the chilling scream of a child being burned alive.

✝✝✝

Well, that certainly escalated quick, didn't it? >.> Soran has been away for a few days and Wallie is having weird nightmares. What could the nightmares be about and are they a sign of trouble ahead?

✝Fifty-One✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Soran does not rest while at The Bloody Keep. He worries over a great deal of issues. Karsissia's home is not a place that any should wish to be, but what he worries about most of all resides in his own home. Malatis has yet to give off any signs of a troublesome situation. Soran worries nonetheless. He tosses and turns in the night resulting in him getting up to continue his research instead. There's no point sleeping if sleep will not take him, and there's no point being there any longer than necessary. He will work and work until the deed is done.

For once, Soran willingly drinks when the mindless servants trudge over to him. On a silver tray rests a heart so warm it still steams and a fresh pitcher of blood. Soran nearly rips through his bottom lip when the tray is presented to him. After the servant exits, he eats swiftly then hides the empty tray in shame.

Being hungry has become the norm for Soran, being at the point of starving no longer bothers him. Hunger is but a dull throb not even worthy of being called an annoyance. Instead, he hates the sensation of being full only to crave more. That's how feeding is; eating and devouring yet continuing to thirst and that is not a mindset Soran wishes to keep. However, the fastest way to leave is to work, to never take a moment's rest. It's why, after a long nine days, Soran has gotten as far as he has.

As Karsissia said, she and Quelen went missing for nearly five days. While they staked out the Unborn's camp, Soran went over Karsissia's own notes into the matter. There is much she did not share. He is the disappointment, after all, but she knew Soran had a far more analytical mind than hers. This time around, more information is given, some that even he hasn't discovered over the years.

For example, in Karsissia's own writing, she never states how, but she admits to her death long ago, along with Quelen's. That points to more proof for a theory Soran always had; one has to die first before becoming a vampire. In Soran's case, the priests that cared for him in his youth once admitted that Soran's mother grew very ill while pregnant. Soran stopped moving, everyone feared the worst. By then, the priests were already toying with her, who knew what really happened. The only thing Soran was told was that two weeks later, he showed signs of life again. During his mother's illness, Soran must have died before he was even born.

Karsissia is good at keeping secrets though. To this day, Soran doesn't know if she is even aware how to create a vampire either. If she does, she certainly has the answers well hidden. The most Soran knows is that the caster must first give themselves to Tethros. They must dabble in the dark arts until they are no longer human already; another common notion in all three of their pasts, both Karsissia and Quelen were once Unborn whereas Soran was manipulated by them. The Unborn are the only ones capable of bringing about another vampire because they are the only ones able to call to the darkness. No Priest of Aena could ever commit such a feat, not without losing themselves completely.

Over the last few days, Soran sat through the long hours of day and night, finding that there has been even more going on than what he, and those in Aberia, knew of. In Yvlacna there are countless missing persons, turns out Karsissia isn't only to blame. She actually kept up with, as she called them, her flock. She never took too much than what she thought could be replaced. Karsissia always wanted to make sure she had a variety of meals to choose from. But it isn't just Yvlacna either, all over humans are disappearing far more rapidly and the Unborn's numbers are growing, all slowly traveling to the same camp.

Even Soran had grown anxious by the time Karsissia and Quelen returned. With them, they had nearly two dozen Unborn corpses and another dozen alive. Those that lived were kept in the prison cells beneath the keep while the corpses came and went from the lab over the coming days. Soran interrogated those that he could, who had limited information that he could easily discover by cutting them up so he chose to go that route. After slicing

into them to see what he could find, the answers he got became troubling. It's why he has called them all to meet, to examine what has been found and, hopefully, get some answers.

"Disgusting," says Karsissia with a single hand elegantly hovering over her grimacing face.

Quelen eyes the pulsating flesh within one of the Unborn's chests when asking, "What is it?"

"This one had a peculiar marking on his chest," Soran explains. He hands a scroll over for Karsissia to inspect. Soran had drawn the mark. She passes it to Quelen next. "When I cut him open, this was what was beneath." Soran reaches in with a scalpel to pull back a piece of flesh. Within the gnob is a binding stone that the Unborn's flesh has simply grown around. The stone is black as night. It starts to crack so Soran swiftly lay the flesh back down. "I've checked a few others and found something similar, some with multiple stones that must have been in them for years."

"Why?" asks Karsissia.

"The research I have done prior showed that even the Unborn cannot handle the vilis they have been tampering with. However, with these-" Soran taps the gnob with his scalpel. "They can bind vilis to the stones and use it when needed, like storage, just as priests and knights do with lumen."

"Why bother though?" Karsissia huffs. She reaches in, uncaring of the stench or the blood, to rip the stone out. The moment she does, it flashes a brilliant purple before shattering into nothing.

Soran groans. "That was an excellent specimen that you just ruined."

"You said there's more." Karsissia wipes her hand off on Soran's jacket. Quelen holds back a chuckle while Soran scowls. "Anyways, even with these stones, the Unborn continue to have the same limitations. What use are they? I imagine this procedure is difficult, life threatening even."

"Certainly. The corpses I've seen until now have a few odd scars similar to these, but they must have been failures."

"You said they're like storage," Quelen remarks, rubbing his chin with a thoughtful scowl. "So they are, literally, storing up magical energy that, say they had enough of, could rival our own?"

That catches Karsissia's attention. She scowls. "One could not hold so much, even with those stones."

"Yes, but many possibly could."

"Are you suggesting they wish to take us out?"

"No, but like we feared, they may be wishing to create another vampire, or go even further."

"If these beasts think they can somehow reach our dark lord then they're bigger fools than we suspected." Karsissia huffs. "But even opening a gateway into the unknown could lead to that which even we cannot control. I don't want my flock to be tampered with."

Soran would roll his eyes, but he wants to keep them in his head so he only bites the inside of his cheeks.

"What of the text we brought?" questions Karsissia. "Any further clues in them?"

"Most we are already aware of, save for a few that I'm continuing to decipher but it seems to be pointing to these binding rituals." Soran walks over to one of the shelves to pull out a bundle of scrolls. He sets them on the table for Karsissia and Quelen to flip through.

"It's rather basic work. We've each done half of the ritual ourselves, casting vilis into an object, but keeping it stable while within a body that is coursing with vilis is a bit more complicated. I hate to say it, but their research into this matter is impressive. They're excelling at a rate that I'm sure I can say none of us are comfortable with."

"Certainly not," hisses Karsissia. "Wiping them out is our last resort. We don't need any priests meandering around."

"Then we stick to keeping a watchful eye on them for the time being, as planned?" Quelen questions.

"Yes, although I am adding a new play into the mix." Karsissia's smile is never inviting or nurturing, only cruel. Even when not pointed to Quelen and Soran, the two can't help but to shiver. "Why, how unfortunate would it be if a new plague reared its ugly head in the camp? Something dreadfully painful and horrifically visual would be nice, don't you agree?"

"Wouldn't be so odd," says Quelen, earning a giggle from Karsissia. "So many traveling far and wide, bringing disease with them, a plague makes perfect sense."

"And even The Unborn fear disease. Should the camp become infected, those traveling will turn 'round and return home. Ah, yes, brilliant! I haven't worked up some chaos in a while." Karsissia claps with gleeful excitement. "Well then, the rest can be done over time. You have both done your parts. When I'm in need of your assistance, Quelen, I will contact you."

Quelen nods.

Karsissia suddenly faces Soran, her smile fading as it normally always does. "And you may return to your precious humans, but continue research into this matter and report all your findings back to me."

Soran bows his head. "Of course."

"If any of this is given to those wretched Baylor's, I will have you screaming in my dungeons for months or years to come, is that understood?"

"I will never speak a word of this to them."

Karsissia presses her cool hand against Soran's cheek. To an outsider, it may look endearing, but there's a threat lingering at her fingertips. She grazes

her nails over his cheek when speaking in a hushed whisper, "Good." She pats his cheek like a child before turning away. "And you best keep your strength up. There may be more work that needs done and I hate to be kept waiting." Karsissia doesn't wait for a response. She has already disappeared from the keep.

Quelen doesn't speak until he's certain Karsissia isn't listening. "Speaking of humans--"

"We agreed you are to keep an eye on him. That is all the information you will receive."

"I needn't know more. If you are asking me to keep watch over a human then it's because he's of--" Quelen smirks at Soran's glare. "Interest to you, which isn't all that surprising."

"Meaning?"

"You've always been fond of them, humans, although you arguably never were one."

"If you are trying to insult me, I take no offense." Soran is quickly packing the remaining scrolls he had to decipher. Already Karsissia's servants have returned to begin cleaning up. Soran does his best not to look at them.

"Oh, but of course, who could ever offend the great Archduke Soran Makai?" Quelen's words ooze with disinterested sarcasm. He steps back. "Did you not bind your familiar to him?"

"Of course I did."

"Then what do you need one of mine for?"

"You know damn well why."

Quelen rolls his eyes. "Just feed regularly. It's not as if you have to kill humans in order to do it."

"If this is your way of saying you won't work with me--"

"It's not. It's not." Quelen raises his hands in defeat before dropping them listlessly to his side. "I'll have Andra follow him--"

"No, Janika."

Quelen snarls. "I am not having one of my best familiars tailing a human for you."

"Janika or Karsissia sees this." Soran holds up a scroll that he had stashed away in his jacket. Quelen only catches a few brief glimpses of the text before knowing exactly what it is. As they feared, The Unborn certainly got more information from Quelen's short capture than expected.

"Of course, I could tell her myself. I read the whole thing over, have it memorized by now." Soran smirks when sliding the scroll into his bag.

Quelen is shaking with rage. "So be it, but know if I lose Janika while babysitting your mortal, I will be using you as bait for catching me a new one."

"How truly awful, I'm trembling with--" Soran stops.

Malatis' sharp howl screeches in his mind. There's a flash of color, Wallie's worried expression and a man in white blurred in Malatis' vision. Soran can taste blood on his mouth then feels Malatis' sharp pain ring through him.

Something is wrong, terribly wrong.

✝✝✝

Uh oh! Some more information drop this chapter. Now we got some hints towards how vampires are created; only an Unborn can accomplish it. Soran did, in fact, tell Quelen about Wallie and he is the one Soran said could hide Wallie if he left. But it may be a little late, huh? What's happening? Is Wallie ok? ;)

✝Fifty-Two✝

Wallie P.O.V

Another dream, but different, shorter. I'd say I'm grateful, but although I'm met with cold darkness it's somehow as terrifying as flames. There's fear, loneliness, sorrow, guilt...and anger. So much anger, all bottled up with no means to escape. As if I'm suspended, body and mind, suspended in an endless dark that no matter how much I reach out, I'm met with nothing. It's simply empty. This goes on and on for what feels like eternity until there's warmth. A familiar warmth and a speck of light grows larger in the distance, but that warmth and that light is not welcoming.

It's terrifying.

Suddenly there's pressure...and hunger. Unbelievable hunger, painful and excruciating, a powerful lust that makes me salivate, or whoever me is in this dream. The world is a blur, suddenly there's so much color, sounds, sensations, cool stone and wires ripping into my skin. Then there's a man, I think, his face is out of focus.

"Wake up! You have to wake up!" The stranger speaks frantically while looking over his shoulder. Then our eyes meet, brown eyes that I recognize wide with fear as he screams, "Wake up, Soran!"

✝✝✝

I've yet to catch my breath after waking. Hael has already woken up and changed, now watching me with a concerned eyebrow raise.

"Another nightmare?" he asks, having put together that I've been struggling to sleep the last couple nights. I sure as hell haven't told him the specifics about the dreams, and I sure as hell don't plan to tell him now.

"Yeah, another nightmare." And someone else's past--Soran's to be more specific. If I was suspecting it before then I have proof now. The child, the flames, the cold dark; more mysteries to Soran's past that only brings about a worse ache in my chest. I don't want to believe it especially--the child, Soran as a child, I want to be mistaken, but I can't even ask. It's been nine days and he has yet to return.

"What have you been doing to give yourself nightmares for a week?" asks Hael with a shake of his head. He gives a sympathetic smile. "Try having a glass of warm tea before bed. It helps me sleep."

"Thanks, I'll give it a try." Although I doubt it will help.

For whatever reason, these nightmares are plaguing me and it's unlikely that tea will be of any defense to them. At least coffee will put up a defense, a defense against Higra seeing as my nightmares and lack of sleep is affecting my work. The glare she gives me when I trip over my feet and drop freshly cleaned curtains on the (freshly cleaned so why is it an issue) floor is downright demonic. Admittedly, the shiver that rolls up my spine has more to do with her admittance to spying rather than the glare.

She is only one spy that I know of. I thought I'd feel a bit better knowing their identity, but I don't. Now when Higra is around, I question everything I say and do, although I try my best to act normal. The last thing we need is the prince figuring out she spilled. Regardless of her spying, I don't want anything bad to happen to her.

I let out a heavy sigh. Soran, when are you returning?

"When do you suppose His Grace will return?" asks Janein as if she read my mind. She's dusting the library with me, pulling out every book to wipe them clean. It's monotonous work, but monotonous sometimes helps. I get into a groove and stop thinking so I suppose it isn't too bad.

"I don't know," I answer. "Why? I thought you were all glad he was gone."

"It's certainly less stressful." Janein shivers. "When he's here, I always feel like he knows everything that's going on. If I slack off or speak a word, he'll

somehow know."

"And yet you gossip all the time."

Janein giggles. "True, true!" She then stops to look at me with a curious gaze. "He doesn't bother you though, does he, Wallie?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, everyone knows that you're closer to him than most. It boggles my mind that you manage to speak so freely with him."

"Is that jealousy I hear?" I tease, not surprised to find Janein rolling her eyes.

"Certainly not. I am more than happy to be a nobody."

"His Grace doesn't view you, or anyone here, as a nobody," I argue. Janein tilts her head curiously. "He may not show it, but he does care about his workers."

"Yeah? Tell him to give me a raise then."

"You should ask him yourself."

Janein squeaks. "I could never! He terrifies me!"

"If he wasn't a vampire, would he still terrify you?" I ask, surprised by my own question. Janein is the same. She's watching me like she expects me to elaborate.

She ends up answering though after a moment of thought, "Absolutely. His personality is scary without being a vampire thrown into the mix." Janein wraps her arms around herself. "Not to mention, he is of royal blood. The gap between a servant and a royal is too great. I'd still be scared."

Suppose Janein is right. Soran would scare most even if he wasn't a vampire. Then again, I imagine he would have grown up much differently. Hell, he'd likely be a prince still had Emperor Elyon not gone off the rails.

That's odd to think about and I'm almost angry with myself for being glad that Soran is a vampire. If he wasn't, we wouldn't have met, right?

I shake my head at my own ridiculous thoughts when heading back to the lounge. Although this last week has been the official end to winter, it somehow feels colder at the estate. I hope Soran will return soon. The snow has completely melted and the gardeners have returned to tend to the landscape. Grass is growing bit by bit and buds are slowly forming on tree branches. Will he be back in time to see them bloom? I hope so. Maybe I could talk him into going for a walk?

Birds sing as they return from the south. The sky is a clear blue and sun warm, passing through the windows that will soon be opened once the heat has returned. I can only hope Soran returns by then. Even if he said he could be a while, I was seriously hoping he'd be back in a few days, not over a week!

Soran's lack of presence also does not help the many questions that have formed in his absence. The nightmares most of all, thinking about it, the one change is my link to Malatis. Malatis is obviously linked to Soran so the nightmares are his memories. That's about the only theory I can come up with, but I think I'm on the right track. Mostly because of the most recent nightmare.

Those eyes, I've seen them before. It's as if they simply clicked into place. The family portrait in the closed off room--the man with a strong resemblance to Soran. I'm fairly certain it's a younger version of him. To make sure I'm right, I request the keys from Higra later in the evening. Considering how easily she hands them over, I'm guessing Soran said something but who knows.

I open the first locked room with the family portrait, making sure to shut and lock the door behind me. I doubt there's anyone as curious and has as much of a death wish as me, but I rather not risk another person snooping. After the click of the lock, I admire the painting to find that, yes, those eyes from the dream are the very same as the man in the painting.

"You have to wake up! Wake up, Soran!"

He sounded absolutely terrified. His eyes were screaming before he was. The memory sends a chill through me. I shiver and cross my arms. I wish I knew his name--

A low growl startles me.

"What the--" I haven't the time to even inspect the noise before spotting Malatis beside me, having appeared out of thin air. His jaw is clenched, fangs slipping past curled lips. The black fur on his back stands at attention while his eyes fixate on movement outside the window. He's pressing against me, retreating towards the door.

Here I have been wishing to see Malatis, but now that I am, all I feel is fear.

Considering he hasn't shown himself until now, that means there's trouble. This is proven when the defenses Soran mentioned around the estate suddenly reveal themselves. There's a flash of light that bursts through the windows. When that light vanishes, there's a familiar sight outside. The bubble that Soran cast around his office before his departure; a much larger one resides around the estate. My initial response is to get a better look, but Malatis is now head butting me towards the door.

Now we're in the hall. There's more flashing lights and loud explosions followed by the ground swaying. Shouts of confusion and terror ring through the halls. I spot a few maids rushing downstairs. Higra's voice carries from the floor below, "Everyone to the cellar! Hurry to the cellar right now!"

Malatis is pushing me towards the stairs. When a fellow butler spots him, he actually screams. I'm not even sure if he noticed me, his eyes were fixated on Malatis before running with his trail between his legs. Malatis doesn't appear to care. He's guiding me down the steps, having picked up his pace once realizing that I'm running after him. It's not the cellar that he takes me to though, rather it's the library and he even shuts the door in my face!

"What the hell?!" I shout, going to open the door except it's locked! Is he really smart enough to lock doors?! Apparently, yes, yes he is.

"Malatis, hey, where are you going?!" I ask as if I expect him to respond.

He doesn't.

There's a concussive blast that knocks me to the ground. My head is ringing. The mansion cries; glass shattering, chandeliers crashing to the floor, bookshelves and pictures fall to the ground. It's chaos, but the library window is fine and the bookshelves barely move. After the blast, there's a flash of white light so bright that it's blinding. My vision blurs, colors fading in and out, the world twisting together, pulling apart then melding back into one piece. I don't know what's going on. My eyes are shaking. I think I'm going to be sick.

I rush to the window in an attempt to see anything. What I find are white lights, like snow raining from the sky. The field around the estate has shattered, it's particles slowly drifting away and fading into soft trails of light. There's fire, flames suddenly take over the trees until they are bright orange beacons in the distance, but they're growing closer and closer and--

"Holy shit!" I drop to the floor.

The fireball heading my way slams against the window but it disappears into a ball of smoke. I didn't even feel the heat. Sitting up, I find there's another field around the mansion itself. I'd say my heart settles, but it lasts all of a second upon spotting a group of strange figures breaking through the tree lines. There are five in total, four of which are in deep purple robes and one in pure white. Their hoods are up, but they're too far for me to make out much else anyways.

Malatis appears, swooping down from above. The purple robed assailants turn their attention to the familiar. I've never seen magic performed in such a fashion. Their movements are inhuman, fading in and out of my sight like mirages. Malatis is faster though. His wings carry him so swiftly that he's barely even there. The shadows move around them, twisting into forms of soldiers with shields and swords raised. I fear for Malatis' safety until those soldiers attack the robed assailants instead.

Just how many defenses did Soran make? I haven't the time to consider or even pay attention to the battle because there's one attacker left. The, presumably, mage in white is heading this way. Fast. A mere blur moving across the estate. Shadows move across the ground attempting to grab at their feet, but the mage moves swiftly in random patterns, hopping over dark hands that stretch above to grab at them. I drop to the floor, unsure if they've managed to spot me from a distance or if I'm even the one they're after.

What do I do? Is there a weapon nearby? Somewhere to hide? The door is locked. I can't leave so my eyes scan the room.

The only object close to a weapon is a candelabra so I grab it fast after tossing the unlit candle aside. Then I rush to hide amongst the bookshelves, attempting to shield myself in the shadows just as a fearsome growl permeates the air. Malatis? I can only hope it isn't. It's hard to see anything from where I stand and I sure as hell don't move when the mansion starts to rattle violently.

Someone is at the front door. Flickering lights of orange, red and white come from the window, casting eerie shapes across the floor and cutting against the bookshelves. The library appears as if it's on fire. I feel as if it is, hot and short of breath. My hands are sweaty, but it's odd how quiet my mind is. There isn't a single thought other than hide, hide and hope I'm not found.

But the door eventually gives in with another loud bang. I flinch. My knees shake with every footstep that grows closer and closer. Someone is at the library doors. A voice mumbles outside in a language I do not understand, but I can assume it's a spell. One that must have done it's purpose as, not long later, the doors swing open.

I'm not breathing. I'm not moving. I'm only listening and watching as a shadow moves into the room. Their movements are slow. They shut the door behind them then a smooth man's voice drifts into the room, "We're not here to harm you."

He has a heavy accent that I vaguely recognize. I may have heard it once or twice in the market. Aberian mustn't be his native tongue.

"Come quietly and I assure you that you will be safe and comfortable with us."

He's getting closer. I step out from one of the aisles to press my back against the end of the bookshelf. My eyes are focused on his shadow. In the distance, the sounds of battle are growing closer. I hope Malatis is ok.

"Don't make this difficult, Wallie."

I shouldn't be surprised he knows my name, but my heart skips a beat in fear. My grip tightens on the candelabra, which turns out to be an even more useless weapon than expected after I blink once only to be met with a pair of orange eyes locking with my own. Still, my instinct says to swing so I do, but the candelabra is caught with ease, ripped out of my grasp and flung across the room.

"A fighter, huh?" The man chuckles, taking me by the wrist, which lasts all of a second seeing as my fist meets his face. He grunts in shock, stumbling back while I make a run for it. He has time to look up at me before I push all my weight onto the bookshelf.

"Argh!" He cries when the bookshelves come crashing down around him. My feet carry me to the doors, but that's as far as I get. A pair of hands grip my arm then flip me through the air like a rag doll. I hit the ground hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs.

"I see you won't come quietly," he snarls. The stranger brushes back his hood to reveal tan skin and a shaved head covered in deep navy colored glyphs. They disappear beneath his robe, some are even inked onto his hands. "I was a bit disappointed when seeing you for the first time, but now I must admit, you're more entertaining than expected."

"Who the hell are you?!" I ask, attempting to crawl away. My hands are searching for anything to use. There's a book nearby so I throw it with everything I have. He smacks it away. During a time like this, I desperately

wish my studies have gone more smoothly. I've been reading a book on magic, but not enough to know any myself. If only I knew a little, I could at least defend myself!

"You will know soon enough. For now, we must leave before the monster returns." The mage holds out his left hand. The tips of his fingers shine blue, but whatever spell he planned to cast ends when the window shatters. I throw my arms over my face to shield from the glass. There's water raining over my arms that slowly lower themselves to discover it's not water at all, but rather blood pouring from the man's arm that Malatis is sinking his teeth into.

A foreign language filters from the strangers mouth. His arm twitches uncontrollably in Malatis' clutch. I'd be relieved if not for Malatis' own injuries. His left wing is broken, the bone poking through the skin. There's blood dripping from wounds I can't clearly see and yet he doesn't let go even when the stranger pulls a dagger from his robes and slams it into his back.

What do I do? What *can* I do?

There are more footsteps, two more mages burst into the room, where the other two are I don't know. Everything happens so quickly that I can't quite explain. Ropes of golden light appear out of thin air. They wrap around Malatis' thrashing form. Blood is everywhere. I taste it on my tongue. Malatis' cry is loud, painful. Sad eyes lock with my own as if to apologize. He's forced to the floor, mewling and twisting in agony as the robed assailants stand over him, battered and bruised.

The man in white steps towards me. His left arm twitches, resting uselessly at his side. He's sweating, eyes red with exhaustion yet he doesn't hesitate to hold out his hand. I think I'm moving. I honestly don't know. The world seems to fade from view, sounds and colors disappearing in a flash of blue light.

Then there's only darkness.

✝✝✝

Look how nice I am to give you a long chapter...only to end it on another cliffhanger, MUHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! So Wallie's visions have to do with Soran, what do you think of the little bits of his past shown? And who the hell has kidnapped Wallie? =O

✝Fifty-Three✝

The chamber is cold, dark, and wet. Iron clasps dig into my wrists, the metal is painfully cold. My skin breaks out with goosebumps with every brush of the chilled air in the room; the room that I cannot make out. There's no light, only darkness. My eyes struggle to adjust, but the most I can make out are my hands trembling. The only sound is that of my labored breaths that echo in the vast chamber. My body is sore and memory hazy.

The last thing I remember; Malatis being caught and the mages breaking into the mansion. When I awoke, I was here and I don't know how long I've even been awake, only that I haven't made a sound. I rather not bring attention to myself. The longer I last without interactions between whoever my captors are the better, especially since Malatis hasn't shown himself even when my heart rate is borderline explosive.

What happened to him? Is he ok? Does Soran know I'm gone? Who were those mages? What do they want? Is everyone at the estate ok? What should I do? Where am I? A million and one questions fired off every second until my eye is twitching and head throbbing.

A door suddenly opens, light filters into the room. My eyes sting and water from the sudden brightness. As they adjust, a man steps in, his silhouette illuminated by the light. I blink rapidly, finally taking in my cell.

Sure enough, the room is made of stone with an iron chain locked into the wall. The chain rattles whenever I move. There's something in here other than me, a table with two chairs, but that's it. No cot, blanket, food or water, not that I expected any. Still, it's rather telling of my captor that is shutting the door behind him.

Small balls of white light no bigger than a fist form around his figure, illuminating the room perfectly. They hang above, like a floating chandelier, revealing my captor as a man well into his forties or fifties. His almond shaped eyes are fixated on me, quiet and observing. His wrinkled face is

sunkissed and worn with age, a gray scruffy beard and short hair to match. He's not wearing a robe like the mages, rather a suit very similar to Soran's own attire.

When he speaks, his voice is chillingly deep and carries the same accent as the mage, "I'm glad to see that you're awake, Wallie. I apologize for the rather rough meeting, but there was no other way."

Uh huh, sure. Forgive me for not believing you, jackass. If only I had the courage to say that, or the stupidity.

"I'm sure you have many questions," he adds, gesturing towards the table. I take the hint and hesitantly take a seat. During a time like this, I should listen but keep my trap shut. I need to last until Soran gets here. Well, we'll see how it goes, I guess.

The stranger sits across from me. Above the lights continue to hover, now casting not only light but also warmth. The chill in the air dissipates and I find myself calming down bit by bit. My fingers twist the chain, searching for something, anything. Is it loose? Can I slip my hands out of the cuffs? Is there anything in this room I can use? Not really. It's empty, save for us.

"I believe introductions are in order," he speaks calmly, tossing one leg over the other with elegance. There's no doubt that he's nobility, a politician of some sort or somehow connected to the imperial family. I don't recall seeing him at the ball for the Day of Aberia though, then again, we weren't there long.

"My name is Allvar Gresk." He gives a polite nod that I hesitantly mirror. "And I obviously already know your name."

Obviously.

"Where am I?" I ask, searching the room for any indication, but again, there's nothing here. This is a dungeon after all, or maybe just a makeshift cell depending on where we are. It's doubtful they want me to piece anything together so of course there will be no clues here.

However, my eyes rest on Allvar, taking in his fine attire. The embroidery is as intricate as Soran's, but there is a pin on his chest in the shape of a shield. A house sigil? Unfortunately, I am not educated in such matters, otherwise I may be able to guess. It's not the imperial family's though, I know that much.

"Nowhere you've likely been before." Allvar snaps his fingers. The door opens. A maid walks in, attempting to shut the door swiftly but I manage to note that we are definitely in a dungeon of some sorts so not a make shift room. The hallway is made of stone as well and there's torches outside the door.

The maid sits a plate of steaming soup before me along with a glass of water. She leaves immediately afterwards, but I refuse to touch the food.

"Worried that it's poisoned?" Allvar asks. He snickers at my immediate nod. "Why would we go through all the trouble of bringing you here only to poison you?"

"Torture."

Allvar snorts. "I like you, Wallie. You're a smart lad."

He then takes a quick drink from the bowl along with the glass. He returns both to me. My stomach growls when the smell hits my nostrils. I didn't realize how hungry I was until she brought this in here. How long was I out? Or am I only starving due to the situation? Who knows.

"Eat," says Allvar. "Don't worry, there's no plan to harm you. You're bait, nothing more."

"Bait for what?" I play dumb.

"Not what, but who, and I'm certain you already have that answer." He smiles kindly, but that only frightens me more. "The cursed has taken great interest in you, so much so that he fortified his estate. Curious, seeing as he hasn't done so in quite a while, long before my time in fact. That's rather telling. We don't defend unless we have something to protect."

I squirm in my seat, averting my gaze to the shadowy corner of the room. Having his lavender eyes on me is frightening. For some reason, I'd rather have the mages in here than him.

"If this is a trap then why are you telling me?" I ask.

"I hope you do not take offense to this, but you aren't really a threat."

Wow, ok, I take full offense, but I get it.

"But Soran is," I argue quickly, taking a chance to face him. His expression doesn't show any concern and that causes great concern in me. "What makes you think you can stand against him? Taking his immortality out of the question, I doubt there's anyone here that can rival his strength."

"There's certainly a few that can hold him off, but you are absolutely right. Not even I can defend against the vampire forever, but please--" Allvar gestures to the food again. "Eat up while you can."

"While I can?" I ask, watching Allvar head for the door. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You can't eat after our guest arrives and he'll be here soon, I'm certain of it." Allvar gives one last piercing smile before stepping out, thankfully leaving the lights behind.

My stomach growls louder. Steam from the soup continues to warm my face. The glass of water somehow makes my throat even more dry. Why Allvar came in to speak so little is beyond me. Why he is offering food and drink is also beyond me. This whole situation is beyond me. All I know is that I'm hungry, cold, and scared. I've been like this once before as a child. The sensations are familiar. I hate it.

I stare at the soup, uncertain of what path to choose. If I don't eat it I'll lack the strength I may need to escape later. If I do it, there could very well be poison in it. Sure, Allvar drank some, but for all I know he could be drinking an antidote outside the door. Hael has told me about some of his mystery novels, I know what can happen!

My stomach is berating me though. I end up eating the soup so quickly that I don't even remember taking the first bite. The glass of water is chugged, finally quenching my thirst. Nothing happens afterwards. I'm left alone in the room, wondering what the hell is going to happen next and almost hoping Soran doesn't come.

✝✝✝

Aw shit, Wallie is still kidnapped and he has no idea where he is or who has done it. Will Soran show up in time?

✝Fifty-Four✝

I don't know how much time passes between Allvar's exit and the door reopening. The wait felt like hours, but could have been minutes. Familiar robed mages waltz into the room, two in total. I jump to my feet, backing away only for one to step on the chain, locking me in place. The other removes my cuffs. There's a moment where I consider stabbing him in the eye with my fingers, but I'm not a great fighter against the average man let alone mages. So his eyes are safe...for today.

The two grip me by the arms, dragging me out into the hall. A flash of the nightmares I had only a few nights ago remind me how similar of a situation this is; a helpless person being forced through dark halls to an unknown location. Luckily for me, there is not a torture room at the end, but rather a set of stairs leading into a nicely lit tower. My neck hurts from craning upwards to admire the dark gray stone steps leading high above, but we don't linger long. The mages are rushing me towards a wooden door. There are armored knights standing guard and the same sigil rests on their chests as the pin that Allvar wore.

When the door opens, I'm shocked at what I see. We went from a dungeon to a beautiful hallway with lush purple and gold rugs atop gray stone. To the right is a long line of domed windows, the view of which informs me that Allvar was right. Wherever I am, I've never been there before. This place must rest on a hill or cliffside as it's high above the vast wilderness reaching as far as the eye can see. Tall pine trees with a river cutting through the mass of green stretches into the distance. There are no signs of people, not huts or villages, not even a path.

I have no idea where I am nor have I any clue how we arrived. This is not Vashna, although it may not be far outside of it. The mages don't allow much gawking as they are rushing me forward, through the long narrow halls, past servants, knights and other mages. It seems they care very little if I see anything, which I'm grateful for. At least the foreign view keeps my nerves occupied until we go through another set of doors.

We're in another tower, only at least four times as large and far more intricate. The tower reaches high but has no windows. There are torches burning on the walls with more carved symbols and clear stones that I can only assume reach up to the top. The stones are not diamonds, they're far more rough, similar to the one that Lord Movell had on his staff or Lady Connte on the hilt of her blade. At the center of the tower is a strange white glyph. The symbols are similar to the ones tattooed on the mages' skin that kidnapped me.

Speaking of the kidnapper, he's here, standing next to Allvar, five knights and five more mages. They're huddled outside of the glyph, speaking in the same foreign language the mage used. They only stop when I'm brought to them and shoved to my knees, peering up at the mostly narrowed gazes now fixated on me.

I am so fucked.

"Wallie, thank you for joining us," says Allvar. He gestures to the kidnapper. "You've already met Nawa."

Nawa nods as if to say hello. I scan over him, peering at his arm that is wrapped in bandages but appears to be working fine. How long was I out? Or was the wound one that he could heal? And speaking of the kidnapping--

"What happened to Malatis?" I ask, peering about for the familiar, but he has yet to reveal himself. His absence is making me more nervous by the second.

"Malatis?" Allvar hums, glancing at Nawa.

"The familiar, I assume," Nawa explains. He looks bored when replying to me, "The bind has been cut and the beast returned to The Veil."

"So he's alive?"

"Yes."

I'm relieved, although I'm confused as to why they wouldn't kill him. Whatever, as long as he's alive. Let's hope I can follow in his footsteps because it's beginning to feel like my "bait" status is about to be revoked and replaced with "very fucking dead."

Nawa says a few words to the mages beside me. I don't understand any of it and so I'm shocked when I'm brought back to my feet and dragged across the room. I would struggle, but there's too many people here. Rather save my energy than put up a useless fight.

I'm chained up again, this time to the wall so I'm sitting on the floor with my hands dangling beside me. Perhaps sitting is a good thing, after all, my legs are shaking so badly I'd probably fall right over if I got up on my own. My hands are trembling too, the chains are rattling. The breath catches in my throat. I feel I'm going to be sick. This is too much. Part of me believes this is another nightmare I will wake up from. This shit happens in stories, yet here I am.

Nawa and Allvar are clearly giving orders to the others, shouting and pointing about the room. The mages and knights nod and respond from time to time. None pay me any mind, conversing among themselves. Nawa leans over, his hand hovering above the circle that flashes with a golden light. At that moment, I feel oddly at ease. It's difficult to explain, as if a natural light and warmth washed away the fear. Even afterwards, I feel lighter, calmer, although that's slowly fading. Allvar must notice this because he smiles.

"Lumen," he explains, holding up his hand that is suddenly enveloped by a white mist. The mist sparkles with light and the more I look at it, the more at ease I feel. "Unlike vilis, lumen is magic of light. It's almost a trick." Allvar steps closer, leaning over to allow the mist to seep around me. Suddenly, it's hard to breathe. Every breath turns painful until I'm gasping for air yet the fear is almost numbed by this overwhelming sensation of warmth.

"Strange, isn't it?" He asks. "Even when used to attack, we can't help but feel at ease in our Goddess' light. It's when it is tainted that we truly see it for what it is."

Suddenly, the mist is alight with flames. I curse as the fire grows near, but is snuffed out before it reaches me. The sense of ease is gone, taken away with the smoke.

Before I can ask a question, Allvar steps away. There's a loud crash in the distance. Everyone in the room stiffens, save for Nawa and Allvar. They glance to one another, nod, then shout a few final orders. Allvar is watching me again with a quiet stare.

I'm short of breath from what happened. I'm exhausted, but when the tower shakes and I hear another thunderous crash, the energy returns. Even I can sense his magic, this sort of staleness to the air and a cool wash of terrifying power, but I'm not scared at all. I'm relieved.

Soran is finally here.

The castle shakes. Dirt and plaster rain from above. The mages encircle the glyph chanting in a foreign tongue, but different than what was spoken before. Their arms are outstretched. The same white mist that Allvar showed earlier is slowly encasing them. The magic billows out across the floor in waves, as if the mist has a mind of its own. Although it has no physical form, I swear I feel weight when it reaches me, never rising but always lingering. The glyph glows bright white and the stones begin to ring a soft tune.

The knights stand tall in front of the closed doors. Their shield's rest before them. Swords at the ready. Allvar remains at my side, arms crossed, waiting. More shaking. Thunderous claps as if a storm is brewing within the very halls. Sounds mix together until I am uncertain what is in this room and what is outside. My ears are ringing. My head is pounding. My heart is racing. The chains rattle. My fingers grow numb. Familiar, this feeling of helplessness, simply sitting here waiting for the inevitable. I hate it.

Come on, Wallie. Think. Think. Think of something. Anything.

A deafening roar shakes the room. Screams and barked orders follow. Rushed footsteps. Explosive bangs. Screams and cracking stone. The mage's chanting grows. The white mist encircles the room; faster and faster

until the wind kicks up a storm. My eyes squint in the bright light and powerful winds yet the mage's voices ring above it all. The doors burst open. The halls are dark, but not as if the sun set. It hasn't been that long. This darkness beats as if it's a living, breathing being. It sways and moves like water, until the mist lurches forward, pushing back the darkness. Runes glow in the hall, unseen before but brilliantly golden now. They hum to a strange tune, buzzing in the halls, likely scattered throughout the entire castle. But what are they?

The chanting is in perfect synchronization, their voices booming and powerful. The louder they get, the more the castle stirs. Something grows near, a darkness in the hall. I know it's Soran, but it's in no shape of man or beast. The mist wraps around the mass as if attempting to snuff out a flame. Another monstrous roar so stifling it knocks the breath from my lungs. The knights now press their heels into stone, shields raised. Allvar gives an order. A golden light encases all of the knights, one I recognize as similar to what Prince Cathen had at the Day of Aberia ball.

From the dark mass comes streaks of deep purple lightning. It hisses and cries when connecting with the shields that glow brighter then fire it back as if reflected. The lightning does nothing to Soran, who only pushes forward, but there's something odd. Something off. I swear the next roar that follows is almost painful in nature. As the light continues to encircle Soran, his movements grow erratic. The mist around him lessens until I make out a form within. Still not quite Soran, but something I saw before, on the night he saved me from the assassin, on the night he saved me from Chandri.

This Soran is taller, longer limbs with talons that drag on the ground. He's made of static shadows, constantly moving and twisting. Black wings, consuming all around him, stretched far behind. The only features made out from the darkness are his piercing fangs already stained with blood and eyes a brilliant crimson. Fearful, intimidating, something out of a nightmare, and yet he's stumbling through the halls as if in excruciating pain.

Why? What the hell are they doing to him?!

The knights cry out in unison. They stomp their feet and bang their shields. The golden light around them shape into beams that burst out in rapid succession. Soran deflects them with his wings that scatter the light into dust. This continues, keeping Soran at a slow pace marching forward. I don't understand why. What are they doing?

But the next order Allvar gives results in the knights stepping away from the door. As soon as they do, Allvar looks at me with a crooked smile.

When Allvar reaches out, I sense something is wrong but can't quite explain what it is. I can't scream, but I want to. It hurts, like someone is reaching inside and pulling away parts of me. A white light, no different than what is already around us, is being extracted from me. Something is slipping away, like water pressing through my fingers. Allvar holds this light in his grasp. The bigger it gets the worse I feel. Cold fire, that's the only way to explain the sensation rippling through me. Something that itches and burns yet leaves a frozen waste in its wake.

Suddenly, Soran lets out a shrill scream. As he does, Allvar finally stops and I have enough time to make out Soran's figure bursting into the room, nothing more than a blur of black. His outstretched hand is only a few feet away from me. A bright light flashes followed by five pained screams and an intense buzzing sound.

Then silence.

When my eyes open, all I can do is scream, "Soran!"

✝✝✝

HI! I have an announcement; to my OG readers, the sequel to Speak the Truth is being posted to Tapas on the sixth ^^ I hope you check it out! To new readers, I have a story on tapas called Speak the Truth, which you should totally check out lol
https://tapas.io/series/speakthetruth

Wow...have I become the queen of cliffhangers recently? I honestly didn't realize these chapters cut up like this created so many

cliffhangers until I posted them xD Well, good for me, not so good for you guys~ but uh oh! What did Allvar do? Are Soran and Wallie gonna be ok? What's going to happen next? ;D

cough* you'd know that already if you followed me on patreon, and you would know all the details about Soran's past and you'd have artwork of Soran and Wallie*cough

✝Fifty-Five✝

Trapped within the circle, pierced by thousands of thin white spears, is Soran. The darkness around him fades into wisps of smoke that are eaten by the mist within. That mist encircles him. Soran groans, eyes rolling into the back of his head. Body twitching and bloody. Skin growing gray. Eyes a dull red. When he attempts to move, the spears seethe white and he lets out a pained scream that shakes me to my core. The glyph shines even brighter, casting a clear cage around him.

Suddenly all is quiet and calm. All the magic seeping across the castle has dissipated, or rather, it's all locked inside the cage with Soran. By now, I can barely see him within the mist, but I hear him, low groans and hissed curses.

Five of the mages are also missing, only their robes remain. Dead? What happened? Nawa remains, breathing heavily, sweating profusely and stumbling to his knees. He rests on the ground, pale as death.

"This was much easier than expected," says Allvar until I kick the bastard in the shin. He shouts in surprise, but merely smirks at me.

"What the hell did you do?!" I scream, trying to wiggle my way out of the cuffs, but I'm tired. Unbelievably tired. Within seconds, I'm panting like I ran for miles. My eyes are heavy. It's hard to breathe. I end up leaning against the wall, cold and breathless.

Allvar walks over to the cage that continues to hum the same as the stones around us. "Immortal does not mean unstoppable. I suspected you'd make excellent bait, but this is a far better outcome than expected."

There's a loud bang from within the castle. The knights face the noise as Allvar gives an order in their native language. Three knights leave, assumingly to inspect the commotion.

The cage rattles. Within the mist, there's a darkness that hums but is snuffed out as quick as it appeared. Soran's groans are like a caged wild animal, howling and pained. I can barely make out his form inside, trapped in place, hovering above the glyph.

Something. I have to do something. Is there anything here to help? My eyes scan the area. I peer above. I glance to my wrists, now red from the chains. There's nothing. My head drops in defeat. I can't do anything. I'm merely sitting here, being bait, leading Soran to the real monsters. What kind of bullshit is this?

Why am I so useless?

Another noise, much closer and followed by a scream. Allvar stiffens. Nawa stumbles to his feet. Mere seconds pass before the windows in the hall ahead of us melt in deep orange flames that burst through the windows.

"The familiar is gone, what the hell is that?" hisses Allvar, turning to speak to Nawa.

Both curse when a beast bursts through the stone walls. The hallway crumbles in a cloud of dust, revealing only bright yellow eyes the size of a grown man's head. A low growl grows near moments before a beast that every child secretly dreams about perks it's head into the doorway; a dragon. That's definitely a dragon, not necessarily as big as expected, but the scaled beast crouches, long and lean with a head more similar to a bird's, beak and all. It moves like a cat though, ready to pounce with its wings resting at the side. Nawa and Allvar can only cast a shield of golden light when the beast's jaws open to shoot another wall of flames.

I shout, expecting the flames to take me as well, but the beast is focusing on the cage, hitting it with intense heat that is trapped in the room. Sweat trickles from my brow. What am I meant to do? What can I do? I've been asking myself that a lot. I hate it, being weak, being nothing, not being able to help. Soran groans again. Through the mist, I meet his gaze, the dull red flickering like a dying flame.

The cage almost screams out as the fire continues to roar. The tower shakes and cracks. Stones rain from above then the fire stops. My eyes adjust to the sudden darkness, only to widen in terror when Allvar is swatted away by a taloned paw. His sword is drawn in a second, but it's a little too late. The dragon rips the chains from the wall and I'm picked up by its claws like a rag doll. The world becomes small in an instance after it easily bursts through the ceiling, carrying me high above into the sky.

"Wait, wait!" I scream as if it'll listen to me. The wind is so powerful that I can barely open my eyes. The world below is nothing but a sea of green. I feel sick and I don't know if it's from panic, the height or both.

"We can't leave Soran! Go back, go back, damn it!"

The dragon does no such thing, only continues to move through the clouds until it's gliding. Finally, I can take a much needed breath. The panic settles when taking in the view below. From up here, everything is so small, almost meaningless. The castle is but a gray speck in the distance. The river is a deep blue and the forest an enticing green. The sun is beginning to set behind the hillside, casting a pink, purple hue over the land. A hue that is suddenly darkened by a shadow bursting from the castle. My eyes widen, watching the darkness bleed into the sky, stretching far and wide then dissipating into nothing.

"Turn around!" I try again, kicking about until remembering how high up we are. Ah, dizziness is setting in, a stomach ache too. I think I'm about to puke, or maybe pass out. I'm not entirely sure, but the panic is returning amplified by a hundred.

Luckily, we don't fly much longer. The dragon settles into an open field, lightly dropping me in the cool grass. I merely lay there catching my breath, eyes wide until a pair of golden eyes are in view. I shout, scurry back in a panic and stare. The dragon stares back, eyes never blinking, which does not help.

"H-Hello," I mutter like I expect them to reply. The dragon merely sits next to me, nearly as tall as the trees around us. Did Soran mention having

another familiar? He made it sound like Malatis was his only one. Either way, we need to go back so I get to my feet and point behind us.

"Take me back."

I am ignored.

"We need to go back for Soran!"

Except I won't be of much help...

"Or at least you do." I take a chance to step closer. When they don't try to eat me, I take another step until I'm right in front of them. I'm craning my neck to peer up. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Janika barely takes orders from me. She certainly won't take any from you."

My heart stops at the familiar voice.

Turning fast, I spot Soran in the shade of the trees, leaning against one with eyes half mast. His skin remains a dull gray, eyes light red. There's blood, a lot of it. So much so that his clothes are plastered to his skin, as if he jumped in a muddy river. I rush over to him anyway, throwing my arms around him until he grunts.

"Sorry!" I step back, arms raised, arms that are now red with that blood. I lower them as if I think that'll help ease my nerves. It doesn't. The trembling continues until I'm vibrating in place. "A-Are you ok?"

Soran snorts. He's shaking. I barely catch him when his legs give out. He groans when I lower him to the forest floor. With his back against the tree, Soran takes deep heaving breaths. His brows are knitted in obvious pain when he responds, "I'll be fine. We need to keep moving."

"You can't even stand. You need to feed," I say when working on unbuttoning my shirt to pull it back.

Soran's eyes narrow, already catching on to what I plan to say. He cuts me off before I even speak, "No."

"No?" I huff in disbelief. "If we need to keep moving then you need your strength back."

"Yes, I do, but not from you."

"Why the hell not?! Let me help!"

"I'm not treating you like cattle!" Soran hollers, his sharp words freezing me in place. My eyes widen when his gaze locks with mine, a gaze of sorrow and disappointment. "Do you think so little of me?"

"What?"

"Do you think I want to hurt you?" He asks quietly and the words almost hurt to hear. "A bite from me is not pleasant. It will be painful, someone literally ripping into your flesh, consuming you. I will never, ever do that to you so, please, do not ask it of me."

I didn't think of considering his feelings about it. I didn't think he would view it like that...I bite my lip, grumbling apologetically, "I just want to help."

"I know, but this is not the way to do it." Soran gestures to the familiar. "Go to Janika."

"But--" Something grips the back of my shirt. I yelp when I'm pulled back by Janika's beak. She sets me down a few feet away.

Soran is now facing the tree rather than leaning against it. He presses his hands and forehead to it, eyes now glowing bright red once more. The white light that Allvar was taking from me reappears, only this time it's seeping out of the tree. The tree starts to crack and wither, as does the ground around it. The field on which we stand glows with that white light. It is sucked towards Soran, as if he's a void, twisting around then within him.

The more he takes the more the field withers until all is barren, cold and dead, as if a plague wiped it clean of all life.

Soran's wounds are healed, but he still grunts when standing.

"But...how--I thought?" My confused jumble of words doesn't result in an explanation. Soran moves over to me, already assisting me in mounting Janika's back.

"I will explain later," Soran says when sitting behind me, one arm around me and the other gripping Janika's shoulder blade. "Let us get home first then we'll talk, ok?"

I'm hesitant to ask, "You'll explain everything?"

"Everything." Soran frowns. "Though you may regret it."

Janika doesn't give me time to respond before leaping into the air. While I admit it's better to be sitting on her back rather than carried in her claws, I'm still rather uncomfortable. We're high up. The air is cold, biting at my eyes and exposed skin. I shiver in Soran's grasp that tightens around me. He's still trembling though and that's worrisome. All of this is worrisome. I haven't a clue what's going on.

Who kidnapped me? What did they try to do to Soran? What did Soran do earlier? Is he really going to answer truthfully, because I'm getting very tired of being left in the dark? I'm tired of being helpless. If a situation like this were to arise again, I want to help. I want to be able to defend myself, and Soran. I know I can never live up to what he can amount to, but I want to give it a try. I don't want to always be scared, to always be running and needing him to rescue me.

I don't want to be useless.

✝✝✝

I won't be interacting with readers for a while. I'm sorry I can't really be my usual self or even be in a celebratory mood about Speak the

Truth's sequel posting on Tapas yesterday. I'm simply tired of being treated like shit. I'll return in a few days and try to answer comments. Updates shouldn't be affected.

✝Fifty-Six✝

"Everyone is safe and accounted for. There are a few minor injuries, cuts and bruises, which are already being examined by the local doctor. The estate, however--" Higra purses her lips with obvious annoyance. "Is in complete disarray. The library is in ruins. The windows are shattered. The roof is caved in on the west wing. We're still uncertain what all is broken, but most of the kitchenware is shattered and the yard is mostly ash by this point."

"Do what needs to be done. Don't worry over expenses," says Soran. He's resting in bed, back pressed to the headboard. A man was called earlier for Soran to feed on. I can't say I'm completely pleased about that, but Soran asked that I not offer myself again so I won't. Besides, Soran is already appearing a thousand times better, finally out of his bloodstained clothes and skin returning to the natural pale white rather than the off gray.

"I can request the doctor to pay you a visit."

"No need. Have him come up to check on Wallie though."

"I'm fine," I argue quickly. "He should check on everyone else first."

Higra looks at Soran, who only repeats, "Call for him now."

I groan.

"Pay him for whatever treatments were given afterwards."

Higra nods then glances at me. There's almost an apologetic look in her eyes. She nods. "I'm glad that you are safe, Wallace."

"And I'm glad nobody is severely hurt." I glance to Soran, who raises a brow. "Well, almost nobody."

"I'll return momentarily with the doctor." Higra leaves. I almost wish she stayed. The silence that lingers is far worse than expected. I can't bring myself to say a damn thing until the doctor arrives, an elderly man with a bright smile.

"Good evening, Your Grace," he says with a bow. "Are you certain you don't need me to look over you?"

Soran nods. "Wallace has been through quite a shock. Inspect his lumen. Make sure it is not too low."

My lumen?

The doctor nods. He gestures for me to step over to the couch where we both take a seat. Most of what he does is standard, checking my pulse, taking my temperature, the usual. But then he gives me another warm smile when saying, "This is going to tingle for a moment."

I nod, unsure of what he's about to do. He presses two fingers to my chest, shuts his eyes and breathes out a long, slow breath. Like he said, it tingles, whatever it is. The same white light from before appears at his fingertips. I swear I feel it coursing through my veins faster and faster and faster until it's gone in a flash. His eyes open and he hums.

"A tad low," he says when facing Soran. "Nothing to worry about though." He faces me again. "I do suggest you not use any magic for at least a week though. Take it easy on any intense physical labor for the next few days too. Drink plenty of fluids and have snacks throughout the day along with your meals. If you feel light headed or unusually tired, let me know." The doctor stands, smiling between the two of us. "Other than that, he's perfectly healthy, Your Grace."

"My head maid will give whatever payment is needed for all treatments."

"You are most humble, Your Grace." The doctor gives a courteous bow before leaving. When the door shuts behind him, I face Soran, somehow even more confused than before.

"Magic?" I ask, getting up to retake my position at Soran's bedside. "I never used any magic."

"Earlier," Soran explains with a scowl. "With Allvar."

I think back on it, the only thing coming to mind has me asking, "The white light he was taking from me?"

Soran nods with narrowed eyes.

"He was taking my magic?"

"If he took enough he would have killed you."

A shiver runs down my spine. That explains Soran's reaction, and my body's own reaction. The cold fire, as if I subconsciously knew what would happen if he continued. I really don't know anything.

"I intend to keep my promise," Soran adds around a heavy sigh. "But I admit there's much to tell and I can't think of where to begin."

"May I ask some questions then to start?"

Soran hesitates. It doesn't take a genius to guess why. He doesn't want to tell, but he's going to. He has to at this point. I can't deny that I'm uncertain as well, a tad bit scared of what horrors he has in his past. So many years he has lived, I can't begin to imagine what all has transpired, but if I'm to stay then I need to know. I need to know the truth.

I decide to start out simple and gesture to the window. Janika dropped us off earlier after a long ride, I'd say almost a full day, then disappeared into the woods. Something tells me she's still out there, hiding.

"Janika, is she your familiar?" I ask.

Soran shakes his head. "No. She is Quelen's."

"The other vampire? He sent her?"

"Sort of."

Well, that doesn't really answer the question...

"I was summoned by Karsissia earlier," Soran explains. "There's been some trouble brewing among the Unborn, you know what those are, don't you?"

I nod. I may not know much about magic, but all know about the Unborn. They're vile creatures that have turned to dark arts, although I've never seen one up close. Parents always told us stories, that they lived deep in the woods or the mountains, alone. They cast spells and spoke to demons, ate the flesh of man and sold their souls, not much different than what some say about Soran. Scary tales to keep children from interacting with them so who knows how much is fact and how much is fiction.

"She wanted some help looking into what they've been scheming. Let's just say that Quelen owes me a favor after I helped him out of a sticky situation in the past. He agreed to have Janika around to watch over you. Unlike Malatis, she can stay in our realm continuously and draws power from Quelen who, I admit, is far stronger than myself."

So it's true, what they said in the kitchens, Soran is the weakest of the three. After what I've seen, I still can't quite believe it and I wonder why. Is it his age? Or something else?

"He is the acquaintance I mentioned, the one that could take you away--"

"Which isn't happening," I interrupt quickly.

Soran purses his lips. "I didn't say it was happening."

"You were about to imply it."

"Oh, you can see the future now?"

"Maybe I know you better than you think."

Soran hums. My lips twitch back into a smile that he mirrors. I'm relieved to see it. The tension eases a bit, more so when I take his hand. His fingers

twitch. The touch is still foreign to him, that is obvious by the stiffness in his shoulders. But he eases into the touch, his own fingers interlocking with my own. I could get used to this. I want to get used to it.

"I could reach a strength similar to his," Soran whispers, but there's a cold bite to his tone. "Feeding is the key, but the ways to go about it are not pleasant."

"The ways?" I ask. "Like what you did earlier in the field?"

Soran nods. "Why do you think we drink blood?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly. I suppose there must be a reason. We eat and drink for the nutrients within so there must be a reason vampires feed on blood.

"It isn't the blood we need, but rather what is found most prominently in the blood, more so in humans than anything else."

"Lumen?"

"Exactly. Lumen resides in everything. What I fed on earlier in the field was lumen within the earth around us, but taking from such simple beings has severe consequences. Nothing will grow there again for decades and even what I took did very little to sustain me. Humans are more complex, richer you could say, because lumen grows alongside them. You could say it matures and ages, moves and flows. The memories and the heartbreak and the joy felt throughout life, all of it only adds to the strength of their lumen. What Allvar did earlier, extraction, is a form that we can eat as well, but it's far more unpredictable that way."

"Unpredictable?" I ask. The word almost has a physical mass to, something heavy and telling that it's to be feared.

"Lumen that I consume is immediately overtaken by vilis within me. Releasing lumen, allowing it to fester outside a host for even a moment can result in it almost taking on a mind of its own. There could be very negative

reactions. Sometimes it simply doesn't work so biting is the easiest way to feed."

"Wow," I hum, giving a few slow nods. "I feel like everything I've known up to this point has been a lie."

"I suppose it has. No one ever stops to think why we do it, only that they're scared that we do."

"Why do you do it then? Why is it lumen that you need to feed on?"

"That is a complicated question that I fear I can only guess upon," Soran answers with a knitted brow. "Over the years, the only conclusion I have come to is the simple fact that this world is made up of lumen gifted by the goddess. I, and those like me, are not completely of this world. To survive in a world not created for us, we must consume that which powers it in hopes to empower ourselves. Unfortunately, I don't have a way to prove or disprove that theory."

"Do the Baylor's know that?"

Soran shrugs. "Perhaps."

"This is a lot of information to take in," I mumble, and I haven't even scratched the surface. Sometimes I'm not sure if I want to, especially when recalling the nightmare, the child screaming in the flames. Asking Soran means I may be bringing up a truly horrendous memory, one that he can't possibly want to relive.

"Wallie," Soran calls. He tugs at my hand, leading me to take a seat on the bed with him. He leans towards me, eyes a deep and sorrowful red. "You're already regretting asking although you've yet to ask anything personal."

"Don't make fun of me for caring."

Soran snorts. "I'm not, but my past is unfortunately filled with horror. As much as I wish to shield you from it, even I cannot deny that you have to learn the truth eventually."

"I know. I'm just angry the prince isn't here for me to punch when the stories are done."

Soran chuckles. He rests his forehead against my own, bringing a blush to my face immediately. Being this close only makes me want to be closer, and if that isn't proof of how far I've fallen then I don't know what else is. His eyes are closed however, lips set into a smile.

"You're truly odd," he says.

"That's like the pot calling the kettle black."

"Suppose so."

Soran's eyes open. They're as worried as I imagine my own are. He doesn't pull away when I finally say, "While you were gone, I had a nightmare about a child. He was alone in a dungeon, starving and beaten, then he was dragged away to a pit of flames."

Soran's eyes darken. I know the answer before I even ask in a trembling voice, "Was it you? Was it a memory?"

When Soran leans back, he releases a heavy sigh. He takes my hand in both of his, rubbing his fingers along the trembling skin. With a slow nod, he admits to my worst nightmare, "It was. How else would the Baylor's know I was immortal if they didn't test that theory?"

I feel sick.

"If you can imagine it...they tried it."

I'm already crying. There are no words, only anger, frustration, sorrow. An intense rage festering in my chest, towards the Baylor's, towards everyone. I hate them. I hate every single one of them.

"Are you alright to continue?" He asks. I merely nod, too afraid of my own voice to answer.

"So be it."

Soran rests his head against the headboard. His eyes close, and I wonder if it's to save me from seeing his sorrow or his hope that I won't catch onto it.

"To start, the tales are true about my father, a greedy bastard that was growing ill and wished for immortality. He slaughtered all his known family and the priests turned to Tethros to find answers. I did kill my mother, consuming her lumen from within. A war raged in Aberia for six long years, not that I was aware of it at the time. I lived comfortably in the castle. A vampire I may have always been, but there was not much a six year old could do when an army burst into his home. I was captured fairly easily as I did not know my own strength back then, which is where the tales change. The people believed I was exiled to this estate. In reality, I was kept in the palace dungeons, the room that Cathen mentioned at the ball."

I remember the teasing words the prince said that day; *"While you're here Wallie, why don't you ask Lord Makai to show you to his old room? He spent so much of his youth there, I'm sure it would be of great interest to you!"*

"Alita Baylor," Soran spat her name out like bad food. "Kept stern watch over me. They kept me weak, little to no food, and always a new torment, a new way to die for four long years. They realized it was no farce, I was truly immortal. Unlike some of the Baylor's of today though, their ancestors wanted my death. They were trying desperately to achieve it, but the older I got the more my power grew even without proper care. They knew, eventually, I would overtake them, so, their response was to put me to sleep."

"What?" I ask wide-eyed and confused. "How? What kind of sleep?"

"The spell Allvar attempted to use earlier, something similar and far stronger otherwise his attempt would have worked. I slept for nine years until I was finally awakened." Soran's voice dies off until it is but a whisper. He has gone silent, finally opening his eyes to peer towards the doorway as if in a trance. I look back to find nothing there then return my questioning gaze to him.

"Soran?" I shake his hand, bringing his gaze back to me. Dare I say it, there are tears in his eyes, but they never fall. "How did you wake up?"

His voice is so soft that I hardly recognize it, "I said earlier, my father killed all his known family."

I nod, not quite catching on.

"Known is the key word, Wallie." Soran gives a sad smile. "Kailyn Marsh was his name, a knight in the Baylor's own royal guard. He was a bastard son to Emperor Elyon, my half brother, which is where my story really begins."

✝✝✝

Next six updates will be third person P.O.V. flashbacks. Obviously I'll let you know when we're back to the present with Wallie, but uh, prepare yourselves~ Anyways, we've learned some interesting information this chapter! What do you think about how Soran feeds and why he thinks he has to? How do you feel about Wallie's dreams and what Soran said; that they had to test the theory of him being immortal? Will Wallie regret learning of Soran's past?

If you aren't aware, my other story (which you should read if you aren't xD), —K, is now up on Swoon Reads! The whole manuscript is available there. It's a free to use and free to read site. Leave a review and a rating in hopes to help it land a traditional publishing deal, I'd really appreciate it! I left an external link, but there's also a link here if you rather type it in or something.
https://swoonreads.com/m/k/

✝Fifty-Seven✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Kailyn Marsh had a secret that he swore to never tell. Kailyn Marsh was not his name. His true name was Kailyn Makai and he was the bastard son of late Emperor Elyon.

Unknown son from one of the emperor's many visits to the brothels. Son to a woman known only to the emperor as another pretty face. Son to the man that ordered every woman he slept with to be slaughtered and their families put to death to be safe. Son hidden in the woods, left to die only to learn that his mother had died instead.

When Kailyn got older, he swore to work alongside the Baylor's that killed the bastard that dared to take his mother. He swore to make her proud. He wanted to think that he did after becoming a Knight of Aena at the mere age of 26. With nothing to his name other than his own stubborn nature, Kailyn had worked his way up from the 3 year old orphan passed from family to family, living among the streets and begging for money, to a named knight guarding king and country.

But that all changed after only two years of service. When Kailyn was named Captain, a leader of his own troop of five hundred men, he learned a deep, dark secret of the Baylor's.

"Soran Makai, have you heard of him?" asked Grand Knight Lucar. He leaned against his desk, a deep mahogany beast in a burgundy room as deep as the blood of a battlefield. His wrinkled face was scarred and gray hair cut short atop his head.

Kailyn was likely one of very few that disliked being at the castle. He felt nauseous during every visit. There was something in the air that left a vile taste in his mouth. His stomach always twisted into a knot. His head would pound and hands shake. He couldn't explain it.

"Yes," Kailyn answered. "The vampire that lives at the Makai estate."

He stood tall before his leader, brown eyes focused and stern. Kailyn wore his own scars of battle beneath his armor. He was tall, muscular with a scruffy black beard that matched his hair. Kailyn held no contempt for his half brother knowing full well the boy was as much a victim of a poor excuse of a father as he was. However, he wasn't much interested in getting to know him either.

"Yes, the vampire that the public believes lives at the Makai estate."

Kailyn raised a brow. "Believes, Sir?"

"He never left the castle."

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

"As you know, thirteen years ago, His Majesty overthrew the dark priests. The cursed bastard was kept under heavy lock and key here in the dungeons, always watched. We could not risk the child growing stronger, but after many years we learned the gift of immortality is one he truly possessed."

Kailyn was no fool nor were the Baylor's. He knew what that meant and his stomach twisted into a painful knot at the implications.

"After four long years of attempting to be rid of him, he was finally put into a deep slumber. He has remained that way ever since."

"Why are you telling me this, Sir?"

"Because a group of Unborn have been spotted to the east, a hoard of them. His Majesty believes they may have more answers concerning the cursed creature's condition and wishes for you to take your troop to apprehend them. We mustn't have others looking into their research so I am entrusting this duty to you. Defeat the Unborn and bring their research here in hopes that we can finally end this cursed bastard." When Kailyn didn't immediately respond, Lucar asked, "Are you not up to the task, Captain?"

"No, Sir. I will see it done. You can count on me."

"Good. You leave in three days. Good luck, Captain."

"Sir." Kailyn left after a bow, but he barely made it to the courtyard before dropping on a stone bench.

"After many years we learned the gift of immortality is one he truly possessed."

Kailyn grew physically ill. Bile rose in his throat. He swallowed it back with a pained gulp. If what he was assuming were to be true, that meant the Baylor's ordered the torture of an innocent child. Kailyn understood the fear of the unknown. Humans feared change. Feared that which could not be explained. It was a natural reaction. Two vampires lived before Soran, one of which was known as a monster and another a wanderer, but Soran was a child. He did not ask for his condition. He was born with it.

Pain, did he feel it? All those years, alone, probably confused, was he in pain? Kailyn hoped not. He hoped a vampires condition resulted in no pain at all, but those were naïve thoughts. He knew they were.

"Son of a bitch," Kailyn growled. Like it or not, they were brothers. Soran was Kailyn's younger brother. How old would he be now? Nineteen. And how long had he slept? Nine years. So much time lost because of the decisions of others and a fate forced upon him.

"Son of a bitch," Kailyn repeated, swiftly standing to his feet. He didn't want to believe it, but it had to be true. It made sense. The closer Kailyn got to the dungeons the worse he felt and he started to understand why. Call it fate, call it family ties, but somehow Kailyn always knew and felt Soran's pained presence.

"Captain Marsh!" Shouted a guard on duty, saluting the captain when he descended the stairs to the dungeon. The first room was circular in nature with a table and chairs. Two guards were there, cards and coins on the table along with two pints. Their faces were slightly flushed, but Kailyn paid the looks no mind.

Attached to the circular room were two halls. They were carved into the darkness with even more halls reaching out like a spider web. Kailyn's nerves were on high alert, now more than ever, but it was the right hall that called out to him. The flames flickered in the consuming darkness that swayed.

"There's a prisoner I wish to speak to. I will be back momentarily." Kailyn held out his hands. "The keys."

"Right, yes, here, Sir!" The guard gave them over without question. Both remained still until Kailyn disappeared into the right hall. He had traversed the dungeons before, always unsettled and always passed it off as being underground. Now though, it was different. He knew Soran was not kept out in the open, but he followed his gut that led him deeper and deeper into the dungeons until he came upon a dead end.

"Help!"

Kailyn jumped at the voice. He spun around, the flame of his torch flickering as if touched by wind, but there wasn't a single draft. No doors were near, nothing but cold stone on either side.

"Please, help."

Kailyn faced the dead end where he swore the voice was coming from. Maybe not a voice, but rather a feeling. Deep within, he wanted to reach out, to rip away at the stone, to see what was beyond and pull it towards the light. But he didn't. He stepped back slowly, refusing to accept his conscience eating away at him as the voice began to echo even louder in his mind.

"Help! Help! Help! Let me out!"

"I can't," Kailyn whispered and, as if the voice heard him, he replied.

"Don't leave me alone."

Kailyn ran.

He dropped the torch, stumbled through the dark, barely left the keys with the drunk guards, and burst out of the dungeon doors into the sun. The light was meant to warm him, but it didn't. Nothing could. Not even late into the evening as he sat by a warm fire. That voice continued to echo in his mind. He knew who it was without having to see. When he closed his eyes all he could see was his younger himself, shivering in the snow on a street corner, whimpering out to any that passed him by.

"Help." His small hands shook. His lips were cracked. *"Please help."* None spared a glance.

Kailyn was no different. He could help, but he wasn't. He feared what would happen if he did.

"You can't," he told himself. He poured another pint of beer and chugged it in a single gulp.

"You don't even know the boy," Kailyn argued with himself seeing as he had no one else. No parents, no siblings, no partner, no children. He was alone in his home so talking out loud wasn't all that unusual to him. "He's locked up for a reason...although he has done nothing to prove he is deserving of being locked up--no! No!" Kailyn stomped his own foot. "You never cared about him before. You won't care about him now."

That was a bit of a lie. Kailyn was always at least curious. They were related, after all. Kailyn had no other family, neither did Soran. Sometimes he pondered over visiting the estate, but even he was more than a little apprehensive about meeting a vampire. He couldn't deny the few dark thoughts, that perhaps Soran was a hideous beast that would rip out his throat without second thought. That didn't change now either. Perhaps when Soran awoke he would do just that, kill Kailyn without question.

Or he could be completely innocent and Kailyn would be as much at fault as the executioner.

"Fuck!" Kailyn threw his mug across the room. It clattered to the floor. "Ignore it. Ignore it. Ignore it."

✝✝✝

We've met Kailyn, Soran's half brother! He's pretty conflicted about what's going on. What do you think of him so far?

✝Fifty-Eight✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Warning: Violence & Gore

Kailyn obeyed his commanding officer and found the Unborn, successfully handling them. As instructed, all their research was procured. Rather than keeping them under lock and key for their week-long journey home though, he read them.

His years at The Academy allowed him to understand the text that spoke of dark magic. Nothing pointed to knowing how to create or destroy vampires, but there were a few theories on how to trap one. The commander would be displeased as it seemed they knew more than the Unborn did. Their assault was pointless, save for ridding the world of some more Unborn. Kailyn was, admittedly, a bit disappointed too, even if he tried to deny that it had nothing to do with Soran.

Although Kailyn returned having done as he was told, he wasn't feeling victorious in the least. Each night he lay awake, hearing Soran's voice even in his sleep. And when he happened to visit the castle, he always lingered outside the dungeon. Sometimes he swore he felt something tugging at him, begging him to step inside. He never did, but as the weeks turned to months, Kailyn found himself spending more time at The Academy's library.

The Academy had vast knowledge that was not available to the general public. Kailyn's position allowed for long nights of research into the possible enchantment on Soran's cell as well as the one on him. Kailyn told himself he was only curious, it had nothing to do with breaking Soran out...

Until three months later when he found himself tying up the guards of the dungeons so he could secretly sketch runes of destruction across the walls of Soran's cell. A bag of coins, Kailyn's entire life savings, was tethered to

his waist. A carriage waited outside Vashna with a destination to Biem. They would take a boat across the sea to Yvlacna. Soran could either attempt to find his own kind, Karsissia, or remain with Kailyn, although at this rate Karsissia would probably be the better bet. Kailyn was clueless, a complete and utter fool. He simply wanted to get Soran out, away, far away from the Baylor's so he had a choice, a chance to be someone, which was never given to him.

Kailyn could break the enchantment locking away Soran's cell, but there was no telling what was within. He had a few guesses based on research. A slumber, that was what Lucar called it. In the Unborn's text, it was described more as time, suspending Soran in a single moment that lingered into eternity. Oddly enough, Kailyn hoped it was the latter. He found more information on how to break that than he did a random slumber. There were quite a few ways to break such a spell, but some involved herbs or a rare poison from a beast in some weird fucking forest in the middle of nowhere.

"I'm so fucked," Kailyn whispered and yet he still stood within the drawn runes.

Kailyn faced his familiar, Nicko. He was a large black dog that two full grown men could easily ride. His hide was thick leather, but he had eight beady black eyes like a spider and the lean, muscular legs of a cheetah. His speed was akin to none. Nicko had been a friend to him this last decade and something told Kailyn that today may be their last.

He rubbed Nicko's ear. He butted his head against Kailyn's chest in response. The thing about familiar's was that they knew when something was wrong. Nicko sensed it too, but he obeyed Kailyn when he said, "Wait outside. Should anyone try to enter, stop them."

Kailyn pressed a lingering kiss to Nicko's head. Then the dog disappeared. Kailyn prayed to the goddess that they all should survive the night.

Facing the cell with his hands clasped before him, Kaylin uttered the incantation that he had memorized, feeling the lumen warm within him and spread out across the floor. The wall began to mimic wet paint on a canvas, twisting colors that then vanished into nothing, revealing two heavy metal

doors that were chained shut. A meager spell was set upon them that Kailyn merely slashed through with his blade.

By now, it was likely known someone had broken in. Kailyn could not hesitate. He was used to nerves, accustomed to battles, but that never stopped his breath from growing labored. The doors swung open, revealing not a cell, but rather a vast chasm as large as the king's grand hall. The air was ice cold so every breath was seen as wisps of white fog. The circled room was covered in thousands of gems that would glow bright then dim, as if breathing. Perhaps they were as the lights mirrored Soran, who was encased in chains. They twisted around his neck, wrists, legs, chest, everywhere, leaving him hanging in the cold dark. Each breath he took was slow and steady. The lights mimicked him, and though Kailyn calculated that Soran would be nineteen, he certainly didn't look it. Time had stopped. He wasn't a day over ten.

Beneath Soran was a giant glyph that shone an eerie blue. The symbols within were what Kailyn studied in the Unborn's own text. They were right. Soran was suspended in a single moment, most likely the one when someone pierced his heart with a long blade that remained there, glistening in the light. There was no blood and the blade was not rusted, seeming to have not aged either.

To cast such a spell would have taken far more than one knight or mage, but to break it would be much easier. Spells were finicky, they took more than they gave.

Kailyn swung his sword that burst into flames. Those flames cascaded up the walls, shattering the gems that cried out. He continued this, destroying more and more until there were but a few continuing to sparkle above. The chains rattled and the glyph flashed shades of blue. Kailyn stood at the center beneath Soran and pierced the glyph with his sword.

Kneeling, he pressed a hand to the glyph that burned when he began his destruction spell. Kailyn's lumen leaked out once more, spreading around the glyph, twisting into the deep blue until it paled. The stone floor cracked and the glyph dulled until it was but white chalk on the ground.

He was exhausted, breathing heavy, sweating and not even finished. His arms shook when he cut through the chains. Soran dropped into his arms, so light in weight that Kailyn was fearful he wouldn't wake regardless of what Lucar claimed. There was no mention of the sword so Kailyn only took a guess on pulling it out. When he did, it shattered into dust that shocked his hand.

"Damn it!" Kailyn cried, attempting to get to his feet but his legs gave out. He was exhausted and the boy had yet to wake.

"Wake up!" Kailyn pressed his fingers to Soran's pulse, having learned through months of research that the tales were wrong; vampires had one. Soran's was dull, but present. "Come on, Soran. Wake up! You have to wake up!"

Kailyn glanced frantically over his shoulder when sensing Nicko's adrenaline. A pain rippled through Kailyn's side along with Nicko's growl echoing in his mind.

They were coming.

"Wake up, Soran!"

Soran's eyes opened, bloody red that froze Kailyn in fear, but the first words out of Soran's mouth were telling that it was no monster laying in his arms.

"Don't...d-don't hurt me anymore," the boy whispered a fearful plea. "I'll b-be good."

Kailyn clung to Soran's cool skin. His voice trembled when he spoke softly, "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to get you out of here, I promise."

"Why?" Soran croaked. His eyes were rolling into the back of his head and his limbs were limp at his side. "W-Who are you?"

"My name is Kailyn...Kailyn Makai. I'm your older brother."

"Bro...ther?"

"Yes, we're family, Soran, and that means from now on, I'm not going to let anything bad happen to you."

Soran's eyes closed. A tear trickled down his cheek. Kailyn felt Soran's breath and knew the boy was only resting. Another pain rippled through Kailyn. He barely managed to stand, gripping Soran's thin figure. Although his legs ached, he pushed himself through the halls, feeling Nicko's pain and hearing his growls until everything stopped.

Kailyn gasped, felt the breath leave his lungs, a pained howl followed...then Nicko was gone.

"Damn it." Kailyn pushed on. He couldn't mourn. They weren't even out of the dungeon yet, and they weren't about to get out. He barely stepped into the circular entry way when spotting Lucar and High Priest Jarish. Behind them poured in more knights, swords drawn.

"Kailyn," Lucar hissed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What should be done," Kailyn answered, holding Soran tightly. "Torturing and sentencing an innocent child to death, I won't be a part of it."

"An innocent child?" Jarish scowled when pointing a skeletal finger at Soran. "What you hold now is a monster, nothing more."

"This is a child born into circumstances he could not control. You are the ones that chose to make him into a monster."

"It doesn't matter what you think. Your foolish attempt was for naught." Jarish faced the knights. "We can't waste time. Kill him before the beast wakes."

Kailyn set Soran aside and retrieved his blade in time for the first knight to strike. They were men he sparred with, men that he trained himself. Fighting them off would have been easy if he was at his best, but he struggled after exhausting himself. Still, he fought tooth and nail.

Metal met metal in a dance of death that Kailyn narrowly avoided, but not forever. He cursed at the deep gash against his side. He dropped to the floor where Lucar pressed his full weight into the foot at the base of Kailyn's spine. In the time it took Kailyn to fall, Jarish had taken Soran. The priest was moving swiftly towards the cell.

"Put him down," said Kailyn. "Leave him be or I swear I'll fucking kill you myself!"

Jarish paid Kailyn's threat no mind. His main priority was returning Soran and at least keeping him contained until his fellow priests arrived. However, unluckily for him, he was unaware that Soran had already woken up.

Jarish didn't make it ten steps before Soran's teeth sunk ruthlessly into his neck. The high priest's body hit the floor with Soran latched to his throat. Jarish was already limp, laying in a pool of his own blood.

"Damn it, contain--" Lucar's head was relieved from his shoulders in an instant. It dropped to the floor, his shocked expression now permanently featured on his severed head.

Soran swayed, licking the blood from his fingers and lips. He was salivating like a mad dog, eyes wide and erratic, inhuman. Kailyn could merely lay on the floor in terror while witnessing Soran tear the knights apart limb from limb with resounding snaps and crunches mixed with cries of horror and pain. The room was painted red in seconds. Soran licked the blood off the floor, sucked it from his fingertips and ripped it from their guts. He was rabid.

Kailyn nearly pissed himself when Soran turned on him. The boy was more a beast, covered in blood, furrowed brow and snarling lips. A wolf among the sheep, holding Kailyn's head in his trembling grasp. But when their eyes met, Soran stilled. His gaze softened, labored breath evened out. He no longer clutched Kailyn as if it were to be his last moments, but rather held his face tenderly in his grasp.

"Soran," Kailyn whispered, taking a chance to grasp the boy's hand. "T-Take a deep breath. It's ok. Everything's o-ok."

The boy was returning--until a spear pierced his back.

Soran turned on who dared to assault him with a monstrous bellow. The knight was met with Soran's nails in his stomach, slicing clean through the skin until his guts were on the floor. There was commotion on the stairs, a commotion that called to Soran, who disappeared in a few quick strides.

"Soran!" Kailyn cried, grunting in pain as he stood. Horrified screams rang from above. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

There was only one thought on Kailyn's mind as he ascended the stairs; *what the hell have I done?*

✝✝✝

And now we see how Soran was awoken up, not exactly that pleasant, but I'm sure most guessed that. There's not a lot of questions to ask this chapter so I guess I'll just go with; if this is how the first assault on the royal family went, then how do you think the second time came to be? *gives tissues* you'll need these

✝Fifty-Nine✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Warning: Violence & Gore

The palace was littered with corpses in mere moments. Once glistening golden halls were stained red. The east wing was set aflame. Dark plumes of smoke scattered into the sky and across the panicked city of Vashna. Guards charged through the front gates, unaware of the bloodthirsty beast still rampaging in the halls.

Soran never fed from a person before. As a child, the priests brought him glasses and bowls, treated it like any other meal. But now that Soran had a taste, he wasn't sure he could ever go back. The taste was far sweeter, the sensation of life resting in Soran's grasp then slipping away. He took a sort of sick pleasure in it yet, somehow, the hunger only grew. On and on Soran went, cutting down any and all in his path without a thought other than; *hungry, hungry, hungry.*

He fed only briefly until another caught his gaze. A rabid animal among the defenseless. None stood a chance, falling to Soran's teeth and claws. He searched in cupboards, under beds, in closets, finding those huddled in fear within. No where was safe, he made sure of that.

As time went on, Soran could not deny that he became aware, awake. Hunger no longer controlled him by the time he cleared the first floor. Instead it was rage and realization that he was not as helpless as they made him out to be. Powerful. Soran was unbelievably powerful, far more than some measly humans cowering in the corner. They were cattle. Nothing more.

Nothing stood in Soran's way. All the years he was hungry, defenseless, in pain, he could finally pay it back, and he planned to. He planned to run the

city dry for what they did, for what they had done for so long. That day would be the end of Vashna.

And so, Soran butchered the king and queen in their beds as if he were merely swatting some annoying flies. He crushed knights like bugs beneath his boots and he slit the throats of every prince and princess he came across. But when he came upon one in particular, he actually smiled.

Alita Baylor stood frozen in fear shielding a young girl behind her not much older than Soran. Alita was not dressed in her priestly robes, but rather a garrish gown befitting of her title as princess, tenth in line or not. Her face paled. Soran crept closer, a lion stalking his prey.

"Hello Alita," he hissed her name, taking great joy in the visible shiver that ran down her spine. His head cocked to the side. "I've been hoping to find you."

"Run, Meysha!" Alita cried.

Meysha ran, only hearing Alita's scream as Soran tackled her to the floor. Meysha chanced looking back only once and she would regret it for the rest of her life. What she witnessed was a beast clawing at her sister, ripping away flesh with every swipe. Alita fought helplessly beneath him, crying out in agonizing cries. Meysha kept running through the halls, out the back door, until running into Kailyn. She screamed, thinking it to be the monster, but was met with a warm brown gaze.

"Princess." Kailyn knelt with a pained wince. "Princess, look at me! Soran, where is he?"

Meysha shivered in terror.

"The young boy, the--"

"Monster!" Meysha shouted. She pointed behind her before rushing past Kailyn into the courtyard without another word. Kailyn would have followed but he had to find Soran. If he could put a stop to him then he would, he had to try. After all, he was the one that woke him up.

Kailyn stumbled through the halls, finding Soran a moment later but wishing he hadn't. What he came upon was a sight he couldn't put into words. There wasn't much of a human left beneath Soran, merely a blood stained rug with chunks that had Kailyn actually throwing up. Yet Soran continued to hit the cracked floor, splashing blood as he counted, "1,233. 1,234. 1,235."

"Soran," Kailyn groaned. The stench of blood, strong metallic and copper, and smoke burned his nostrils. "Stop. You're...you have to stop."

"1,239. 1,240."

"More knights are heading this way. They're innocent men. They didn't know about you or what the Baylor's did!" Kailyn tried, hoping to break through to the scared and innocent child that first woke. "None of us did, so many of the people today didn't. Please, come with me! We'll leave. We'll go wherever you want to go."

"1,253. 1,254. 1,255."

Kailyn took a chance to step closer. By then, he was covered in blood and soot himself until he couldn't recognize his own limbs. As he grew closer, he noticed tears rolling down Soran's face. He was paying Kailyn no mind, continuing to count in a trance until he finally stopped, "1,460."

Soran finally faced Kailyn with a crooked smile. "One for everyday."

"What?" Kailyn asked, but the stomping of footsteps outside earned his full attention. "Damn it, we have to leave, Soran. Do you understand me? We need to go." Kailyn held out his hand, but Soran did not take it, only stared in clear distrust.

"Kailyn," Soran growled his name for the first time, as if it were a curse. His eyes narrowed. "Brother, you said."

"A bastard son, yes."

Soran eyed Kailyn suspiciously. When he stood, he took two steps back.

"I understand if you don't trust me, but we must leave," said Kailyn.

"I can handle myself."

"By killing more innocent people?"

"Innocent?!" Soran's eyes flashed vibrant red, like burning fires upon the horizon or the sun at dawn. His high pitched scream shattered the windows. Kailyn dropped. The entire city did, every citizen clutching their pounding skulls that screeched with every word Soran bellowed. "You dare call them innocent?! None are innocent! None deserve to live! I'll burn this hell to the ground for what they've done!"

"You have every right to be angry!" Kailyn cried out.

"Angry?" Soran laughed, finally letting up. All of Vashna heaved a deep breath, capable of standing, capable of crying in fear and confusion.

"Angry?" Soran repeated, watching Kailyn with a cold, lifeless stare. He stood motionless, head cocked to one side and blood dripping from limp hands. "They took my home. They locked me away. They starved and beat me."

Soran glared at the bloody floor. "They tried to kill me over and over and over, everyday for years, laughing all the while. I'm not angry. I'm fucking furious. I'm going to butcher every last disgusting creature in this cursed hell and then we'll see who laughs then!"

"You will only prove to them that you're the monster they made you out to be!" Kailyn shouted, watching Soran's eyes widen. He took the chance, reaching out his hand in desperation. "Some of the Baylor's did this. Some who worked for them did this, but the people of Vashna did not. They are told what the royals want them to hear. They are innocent, ignorant but innocent. Do not let the Baylor's win. Do not be exactly what they fear you are."

Kailyn stepped closer. His hand shook almost as violently as his voice, "Please."

"You're asking me to be the better man?" Soran asked mockingly.

Kailyn shook his head. "No, I'm asking you to believe in someone just once."

"In you? A stranger?"

"For the time being."

The castle doors opened. Troops marched in. Soran growled, but Kailyn's voice caught his attention over all the chaos.

"Please, Soran," he said, risking a few more steps until he was standing in front of the boy. "Believe in family just once."

The troops were growing closer. Their footsteps were loud. Kailyn waited in concerned silence. His hand trembled, a hand that Soran did not take, but he healed Kailyn's wound with a mere snap of his fingers.

"Just once," Soran whispered, and he followed Kailyn willingly out the back door.

✝✝✝

Well, we learned that Soran really did kill a bunch of people at the palace. Kailyn managed to calm him down, but how else will everything play out?

✝Sixty✝

Third Person P.O.V.

After two months, Kailyn had grown accustomed to his new life as the kind of older brother, but more like a servant, to the youngest and only vampiric Archduke in history, Soran Makai.

Mere days after Soran's rampage, knights were sent to the Makai estate where Soran had agreed to retreat to. Kailyn was never certain why Soran didn't wish to leave. He worried it was because the child still wished to go through with his plan; punish the people of Vashna, innocent or not. Perhaps Soran didn't really know either because he never explained.

However, three more knights were killed that day, but only after attempting to break through the doors that they claimed were not Soran's to lock. And that is why Soran snuck his way into the castle late the following night, scared the piss out of Meysha, the only living royal and thus queen at the young age of 12, and kindly convinced her into giving him a title as Archduke.

Kailyn had no idea about Soran's plan until the following morning when he saw three trunks filled with gold, a royal decree instating Soran's newly appointed role, and proof of ownership over the estate as well as a mine in Isabe. Kailyn attempted a lecture that was only met with plates being thrown at him from the kitchen where Soran was inhaling chocolate as if it were a drug. To the deprived child, it basically was.

Knights did not arrive again. Life at the estate was quiet, almost normal, save for the elusive child that never did a damn thing about his title, estate, or ownership so Kailyn took up the role of...well, everything. He used some gold to hire a few staff members; two gardeners, two maids, and two butlers. With their help, the estate went from a cold and dusty ruin to a semi-presentable estate. Many rooms were closed off to conserve heat and

man power. Old furniture that was eaten with age were tossed out and only rooms that were often used were replaced with new ones.

Soran did not associate with anyone. If he was not in the kitchen grabbing a snack then he was in his room, scouring the woods or even sneaking into town to explore. Sometimes Kailyn wouldn't see him for days on end then the boy would appear munching on buttered biscuits in front of the fire or camped out in a makeshift tent beneath the dining room table. Soran was finally capable of being a child, and the desire to do so showed, so Kailyn felt that was the way, that was how to get to Soran.

Kailyn started buying toys. Each day he placed another somewhere new. Soran, like a moth drawn to a flame, started searching for them. He found them in cupboards, under beds, sitting on chairs or hanging from tree branches. That was what led to Soran's first initiation of conversation nearly three weeks later.

"Ehem." Soran cleared his throat. Kailyn sat at the dining room table with half a piece of pork in his mouth. Soran's cheeks were dusted light pink when he grumbled, "I can't...find it."

"Find what?" asked Kailyn.

"My n-new toy."

Kailyn smirked. Soran's blush grew until he was glowing red. The boy looked ready to explode so Kailyn quickly said, "Maybe you should ask Lamaria. She's just outside."

Kailyn pointed to the window where Lamaria, their gardener, could be seen working in the grass. Tethered to her side was a fluffy brown bear. Soran narrowed his gaze. He was no fool. He knew what Kailyn was trying to do...but the bear looked really soft. He didn't have a bear yet. Did he have room on the bed for another toy? Probably not, but he could make room.

Soran ran full speed for the front door. Kailyn hacked on his lunch in laughter, watching Soran approach Lamaria and hold out his hand. Lamaria

wouldn't have it. She smiled ear to ear when asking, "Do you need something, Your Grace?"

Soran pointed. Lamaria hummed, pretending to be confused.

"B-Bear," he finally said. Once Lamaria handed it over, he was gone. She glanced into the dining room, offering Kailyn a sweet smile that made his heart skip. Now it wasn't only Soran that was blushing.

"Progress," Kailyn coughed nervously. "Yes, yes, we're making great progress."

The second breakthrough was almost a month later, far less pleasant but the biggest step thus far. Kailyn awoke to Soran's frightened scream in the middle of a cold winter night. He scrambled out of bed to Soran's room across the hall.

"Soran!" Kailyn shouted when opening the door, spotting the boy curled up among his toys with tear filled eyes. Those eyes narrowed.

"Get out!" Soran screamed, eyes brilliant red. He threw the first thing he grabbed, which was a pillow. A stuffed animal followed and another in rapid succession. "Get out, get out, get out!"

"Ok, ok." Kailyn shut the door that could not deafen Soran's soft cries. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"No. I'm not a child."

Kailyn snorted when pressing his forehead against the door. "Everyone has bad dreams no matter how old they get."

Soran sniffled. A moment of silence passed before he asked, "Even you?"

"Oh, yes, I've had plenty of bad dreams."

"Liar."

"I'm not, I'm not! I wish I could say you'll never have a bad dream again, but you will. It's ok though. It's only a nightmare." Kailyn slid to the floor with his back against the door. "What was it about?"

Another pause. Soran's hesitance was heard through his soft voice, "Sleeping. A long, endless sleep."

Kailyn wasn't surprised. Soran was in a long sleep. After waking, he probably feared going back. "That sounds scary."

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm not. We're all scared of something. I'm scared of heights," Kailyn admitted. "I can't even walk out on a balcony without feeling sick."

Soran went quiet again until he snickered, "Scaredy cat."

"Hey now, I thought we weren't patronizing."

"That's not patronizing. It's just the truth."

"Ouch." Kailyn chuckled.

Soran's soft sniffles continued. Since going in was not an option, Kailyn remained seated at the door. His deep voice suddenly fell into a song that drifted into Soran's room. The boy sat curled up in his blankets and toys, red eyes fixated on the door. Kailyn's shadow swayed gently beneath as he sang a lullaby that Soran didn't recognize. Kailyn was by no means a great singer, he was off pitch or changed at random intervals, but Soran didn't say a word. He just listened, and the worries melted away with each passing note.

"What was that for?" Soran asked when the song finally came to an end.

"I've been told it's good to sing a lullaby before bed to stave off bad dreams," answered Kailyn.

"Perhaps not for you. You're a terrible singer."

Kailyn cackled, "I'd like to see you do better!" Soran didn't respond so Kailyn asked teasingly, "Not up for the challenge?"

The only answer that came was the slight knock against the door when Soran sat against it on the other side. He then gave a quiet request, "Sing it again."

Kailyn smiled and sang the song until he took a chance to peer inside the room a few repeats later. Soran lay against the door, resting peacefully with a soft smile. He didn't stir when Kailyn picked him up nor when he tucked him in. From then on, Kailyn sang Soran to sleep every night, "to stave off bad dreams," Soran always claimed and Kailyn always agreed.

Sometimes the nightmares did return, but Soran didn't struggle to find rest. Instead, he crawled out of bed to scurry across the hall. Kailyn's door was always open and his bed was warm when Soran snuggled under the covers with his brother. Neither ever mentioned the sudden change in behavior.

Bit by bit, Soran was opening up and learning what it meant to be a family. Then that family got bigger and Soran's world changed for the better yet again.

Three years later, Kailyn and Lamaria married. They had a small gathering in the estate's garden with only the workers and Soran to attend. A year after that, when Soran was 14, Kailyn and Lamaria had their first child, a small baby girl with big green eyes named Josette. All the work Kailyn, and even the workers at the estate, had put in to help open Soran up over the years suddenly paled in comparison the moment Soran met his niece.

"Come here, Soran," said Lamaria, exhaustion lacing her tone.

In her arms was a blanket that moved gently and the occasional cry came from within. Soran stood fearfully in the doorway. For some time he heard Lamaria's screams at the estate and he didn't quite get how something good could come from such pain. However, Kailyn was crying happily, smiling proudly at the baby in the blanket so maybe it wasn't too bad?

"Soran," Kailyn called when his brother refused to come in. He waved him over with the biggest smile Soran had ever seen him wear. "It's ok, come over. Say hello to your niece."

Soran was hesitant, tip-toeing over to Lamaria's bedside. He sat on the edge of the bed, his arms completely stiff when Lamaria passed the blanket over. Soran had never seen a baby up close, certainly never held one either, and he was not sure what to do.

"Mind her head," Lamaria said while showing Soran how to hold her.

Josette was small, her head no bigger than Soran's hand. Her skin was soft, so soft he feared a mere touch would bruise her. Her cry was quiet, eyes a brilliant green staring up at him without an ounce of fear. Soran swore she smiled at him. Her crying stopped. She coo-ed and grabbed his finger. He flinched at the gentle touch, a touch without bias, without fear. When Josette peered up at Soran, she didn't see a vampire or a monster. Her eyes reflected only Soran because that is who she saw. Simple. Innocent. Pure. A bright white light.

"Her name is Josette, isn't she beautiful?" asked Lamaria, smiling at Soran's wide-eyed expression. Both she and Kailyn were gauging his reaction, pleased with how gentle he was being.

He slowly nodded, peering back down at Josette. She giggled, at least he thought she did, and the sound was so pure that Soran giggled back. He bit his lip and wiggled his finger so she'd make the sound again. She had only been in his life for a few minutes and, somehow, Soran knew that he already loved her and he'd love her forever.

That was very obvious to all, seeing as Soran hardly left Josette's side afterwards. When she awoke crying in the night, Soran was often at her bedside before her parents. He wanted to hold her every chance he got and he'd talk to her for hours on end even if all she did was wiggle her toes and coo in response. When she started to crawl, Soran followed her around the house. And much to everyone's amusement, it was not "mama" or "papa" that were Josette's first words.

"Sowa! Sowa!" Josette cried, unable to pronounce his full name, but all knew it was Soran seeing as she'd point or cry until he came into the room. The moment she saw her uncle, she cooed and giggled and grinned, and so did Soran.

Josette taught Soran to smile for no reason other than wanting to see someone else smile. And she taught him to laugh simply because he liked the sound. And she taught him to love and want to be loved so he showed it in hugs and kisses and hand holding that once was non-existent and now littered their days.

Soran became approachable and affectionate, wanting to be close and wanting to interact. He no longer hid in his room or scoured the woods alone. Instead, he dragged Kailyn out to play or teased the workers at the estate that perhaps regretted breaking him out of his shell after the many pranks that befell them (but not actually.) He went from the standoffish, scared child that others made him to be and became the charming, energetic boy that was always within.

Three years after Josette came Soran's nephew, Jeyton, and seven years after him came the youngest, Annalee. Soran loved each and every one of them, perhaps more so since he couldn't have children of his own. He cared for them with all his heart and they showed nothing but love in return. Sometimes, the love almost scared him because Soran worried over his own fate; immortality. The simple fact was that this family he had grown to love will one day leave him, and not by their own wishes. However, it was the honest words of a child that made his future not as bleak as it once was.

"Uncle, what does im-mor-tool mean?" Annalee asked when picking flowers for Soran in the garden. The children loved to play there, battling imaginary monsters, playing hide and seek or simply frolicking among the flowers. Soran sat in the dirt, smiling after each flower was passed to him.

"Immortal?" Soran asked to which Annalee nodded, her pigtails bouncing along with her. Soran laughed and gently brushed the bangs from her wide green eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"I went into town with Mommy today," said Annalee when crawling into Soran's lap, deeming flower picking finished for the time being. "We heard ladies talking about you. They said mean things, I don't like them."

Soran snickered.

"But they said you were im...immor..."

"Immortal."

"Immortal." Annalee nodded. "But Mommy hurried us home, so, will you tell me? What does that mean?"

"Do you remember how Mr. Biggles fell asleep and returned to the goddess?" Soran asked, hoping the memory of their deceased cat didn't result in Annalee's tears. Her bottom lip did quiver, but she only nodded. "And you know how Mommy and Daddy explained that it's natural for all living things to eventually return to the goddess?"

Another nod.

"Well, Uncle isn't like that. I'm...different. I'll never go to the goddess. I'll be here...forever."

"Forever?" Annalee looked into the sky as if that's what she thought "forever" meant. She pointed to herself. "But I will go to the goddess one day, right?"

"A very long time from now, yes."

"But you won't come with me?"

"No."

"Then you'll still be here after we all leave?"

A lump formed in Soran's throat, one he forcibly swallowed when saying, "Yes."

"Mm, I'll miss you so much then cause I wanna be with you forever, Uncle." Annalee pursed her lips in thought then squeaked, "But, it's still kind of nice!"

"What makes you say that?" Soran asked curiously.

"Because that means you will be here to watch over and love our family forever and ever," said Annalee with a confident nod. "Josette and Jeyton and me want to be like Mommy and Daddy when we're bigger. We'll get married and have a family too one day. Just like we had you growing up, our kids will have you too, right? And their kids after that, and their kids after that, you'll love them and keep them safe, and they'll love you and keep you safe forever and ever. You're never going to be alone and you're going to be loved more than anyone else because you're going to have the biggest, most loving family ever!" Annalee smiled up at Soran, that smile falling when she stood to press her hands to Soran's cheeks. "Uncle, what's wrong? Your eyes are all watery."

"Ah, I must have got some dirt in my eyes," answered Soran with a clear of his throat. He swiftly pulled Annalee in for a hug, burying his face in her small shoulder. Funny how someone so small could claim something so big. Though Soran knew pain was inevitable, Annalee's words were relieving to think about.

"You know I love you, Princess," he said with a shaking breath. "I'll love you until the end of time."

Annalee giggled. "I know! I love you too, Uncle!"

Soran was often reminded how grateful he was for believing in family just once because family had never let him down. In return, he swore to never let down that family either.

Unfortunately, he had no idea that it was a promise he would not be able to keep.

✝✝✝

Hello, I am here to cause pain and suffering, muhahahahahaha! *passes out tissues* I said you'd need these. Anyways, are you surprised with how loving of a family Soran had once? Is his bitter attitude and resentment more understandable after seeing his interactions with them? Please discuss how adorable he was as a child and how happy he was and how he made such a great uncle and would be a fucking amazing father >.< I don't normally want all of my characters to have kids but, damn it, SORAN NEEDS TO HAVE CHILDREN! HE'D BE THE BEST DAD, THE BEST I SAY!

✝Sixty-One✝

Third Person P.O.V.

"You did what?" asked Kailyn over a very tense evening tea. The fire crackled in the stone hearth, casting eerie shadows across Soran's apathetic expression.

"I agreed to join The Academy," Soran repeated, peering into the flames that gave him chills to this day.

He looked to Kailyn, not surprised to find his brother's shocked expression. His brother that was once so young but now sat with a wrinkled face and graying hair. Soran saw time ticking away for all those he loved and yet when he looked in a mirror, nothing changed.

"The Academy that is filled with your enemies," said Kailyn, setting his tea aside to lean forward, elbows on his knees and head down. "Soran, you are old enough to make your own decisions, but I must say that this is the dumbest one you've ever made."

"Your faith is much appreciated."

"This has nothing to do with faith but everything to do with common sense. What are you to do at The Academy? I am no fool to think you will merely sit in on classes about lumen and the goddess."

Soran never expected to fool Kailyn. He was often too smart for his own good, this was no different.

"Soran," he whispered, reaching out to press a tender hand to Soran's knee. "They experimented on you once--"

"When I was a child that they could take advantage of and when the crown held more sway over them. Times are different now. The Academy is it's

own force to be reckoned with. The Baylor's do not rule them and Her Majesty has no interest in vampires or vilis."

"Yes, but...why the hell would you agree to let them use you as a test subject?" hissed Kailyn, the confusion showing in his narrow gaze and clenched jaw.

Soran knocked Kailyn's hand away when he stood. Approaching the flames, he explained, "The children are growing older. They wish to live their lives and I wish nothing but happiness upon them. Imagine how much easier it will be for them, for all of us, if the nobles are calmed by my cooperation--"

"Fuck the nobles," cried Kailyn with an annoyed huff. "We don't need their calm or their approval, and if the children discovered this is why--"

"You will not tell them."

"You don't have the right to tell me what I will or will not tell my children," hissed Kailyn. "And do you honestly think we can deceive them if we tried? Josette, perhaps, she's a kind girl that only wants to see the good in others. Annalee is too young to understand for now, but Jeyton will catch on the moment you say you're working with The Academy. What will you tell him? What would you have me tell him?" Kailyn shook his head. "I will not lie to him that his uncle is safe."

"I am safe, did you forget? I am not like you. No matter what they do, I can handle it. I already have and I will continue to. With this research--" Soran wrung his hands together, peering into the flames that hissed and sparked. "Perhaps...there will be no one to one day follow me."

Kailyn froze; eyes widened in realization.

"You fear another vampire will be made?" Kailyn whispered, joining Soran at the hearth. His brother peered into the flames as if wishing to fall into them and disappear. Kailyn's hand rested on Soran's shoulder, twisting the fabric into his fingers. "If you help them obtain knowledge on vilis then there is no telling it will stop. Someone will get their hands on the truth, the existence of another is--"

"Inevitable?"

Kailyn nodded. "Unfortunately, but it is not your job to try and stop that. Please, Soran, don't let them use you."

"Meysha will not allow it," Soran argued, which had Kailyn hesitating in his response. Both knew the queen was as against the existence of vampires as Soran was. "She has no interest in immortality or unspeakable power. Although the church has some semblance of authority, the queen will forbid this information from getting into the wrong hands. Any knowledge about vilis will be kept under heavy lock and key. And I will be looking into how to destroy vampires, not make them."

"And if you find the answer?" Kailyn asked. The silence that followed was answer enough. His head bowed. His grip tightened. "Soran."

"You can't honestly ask me not to search for death when I know one day it will take everything I've ever loved," Soran's voice broke, a twisting sorrow that made them both shake. "Life is beloved by all because it is a long lie, while death is hated because it is a reminder that the lie must end. I don't want to live a lie forever."

Kailyn pulled Soran in, holding him with the same vice grip as the first. Only this time Soran hugged back just as tight, hands trembling in a way he would only let Kailyn see.

"Watch them, Soran. Her Majesty is strong and stern, but the church is not made up of only honest scholars and fools. There will be those that betray you and her."

"I know."

"And if you do not want to do something, you do not let them make you."

"I am not a child, Kailyn."

"You will always be one to me." Kailyn pressed a chaste kiss to Soran's temple and stepped back with a sad smile. One that Soran gave in return.

So began the days split between The Academy and family.

As suspected, Josette thought nothing of her uncle's sudden involvement with the priests. Annalee only cared about Soran's absences, claiming that work was "the devil" for taking her uncle so frequently. Jeyton, however, was like his father and not easily fooled. At the end of the first week, when Soran returned from The Academy late at night, Jeyton was awake in the library waiting for him.

"What are you doing up, Jey?" asked Soran.

Jeyton sat in a chair with an open book, which he set aside. He was in his uncle's arms in an instant, squeezing him tight in a silent question.

"I'm fine," said Soran, patting Jeyton's head. "Were you worried?"

"It's really late," answered Jeyton, his voice muffled by Soran's jacket. "I started to think you wouldn't come home."

While Jeyton had grown taller over the years, he was still only about a head higher when Soran knelt. Worry was etched in Jeyton's knitted brow and dark eyes, a worry that washed into laughter when Soran took his hands and asked, "Are you implying that you believe those sniveling bastards could defeat your uncle?"

"Not a chance."

"And do you think I'd let anything stand in my way from getting home to you?"

Jeyton shook his head without hesitation.

Soran cupped Jeyton's face in his hand. "Then don't worry. Everything is alright."

"Do you really trust them?" asked Jeyton. His nose wrinkled when he grumbled, "They want you dead because they're scared of a monster that isn't there."

Soran smiled. The honesty of a child often left him a little speechless.

Shaking his head, Soran replied, "I certainly don't trust them, but I am keeping my eye on them. Since I'm busy though, you'll have to keep an eye on everyone for me."

"Everyone? Mom and Dad too?"

Soran gestured for Jeyton to lean over so he could whisper, "Your dad is getting old and slow. He'll go senile soon too, so you must keep your eye on him, but don't tell him I said that."

Jeyton snickered along with Soran. Then he nodded and stood tall, acting like a knight in every fairytale he ever read or had read to him, when he said, "Don't worry, uncle. I will protect them with my life if I must."

"And I will make sure you never have to." Soran stood, his hand pressed to Jeyton's back as he led him upstairs. "Now come along, it's well past your bedtime."

"Uncle, I'm twelve, I don't have a bedtime!"

"Oh? Then I guess I don't need to read you a bedtime story either."

Soran smirked, swearing he saw the gears turning in Jeyton's head. The boy looked up, clinked his teeth again then grumbled, "I guess...it is past my bedtime."

"Mhm."

"So, are...are you going to read to me?"

Soran laughed. "Of course."

And, of course, Annalee awoke at the sound of Jeyton's door opening. She ran and got Josette so the four of them ended up in Annalee's room where Soran read to them in deep and high pitched voices that made them laugh and groan and read along. Soran couldn't have been happier, and he couldn't imagine a life without their laughter.

But then, Her Majesty, Meysha Baylor, grew gravely ill and passed, leaving the kingdom in the hands of her son, Aeven Baylor

Aeven was only seventeen at the time and, unlike his mother, was not a strong and confident ruler but rather a greedy and vain one. He cared about money, power, women, and had a profound interest in the idea of immortality. While Soran knew where Aeven's interest lied, he wasn't all that worried. Only he could tamper with vilis safely and he determined what he would or wouldn't share so the experimentation and research continued. Aeven had priests look over the works, but something, or rather someone else soon caught his interest. None could guess that in Soran's attempt to allow the children a more normal life, it would result in the worst outcome imaginable.

Aeven claimed to have fallen in love with Josette at first sight.

They met at the Day of Aberia ball, Josette's first outing among other royals mere weeks before her 16th birthday. She was ecstatic, wearing a dress as golden as the sun with navy ribbons in her hair. She sang and danced the nights away in preparation, switching between her parents and Soran as partners. Then came the real deal, a dance with the king that tried to woo and charm her through the night, but to no avail. Aeven sent flowers, love letters and requests to meet afterwards, leaving Josette troubled on how to respond.

"Another invitation?" asked Soran when reading over the letter. Josette combed her fingers nervously through her hair.

"Something's not right about him, Uncle. He unsettles me," she said. "But is it alright to continue refusing the king's invitation?"

"You have no obligation to go." Soran tossed the letter into the flames. Both watched it burn with relieved smiles. "But I do suggest sending your regards, thanking him for the invitation. If you wish, claim that I won't allow it."

"Making yourself appear to be the rude, cruel, and controlling vampire?"

"Are you complaining when it's being used to your benefit?"

"But that makes me feel bad. I don't want others to continue seeing you as a bad man."

"It's quite alright. I don't want you going if you don't wish to go." Soran kissed Josette's hand then pulled a letter from the stack on the coffee table. She smiled when he begrudgingly gave it to her. "There does appear to be another letter addressed to you...from the Valen family."

Josette's cheeks tinted pink.

"Name?"

"Reya," answered Josette around a giggle. "The one in the green and silver dress. She had short hair." Josette held her hands to her chin. "Did you see her?"

"Mm, yes, I believe you danced with her too."

"Mhm."

"And your answer to this invitation?"

"Yes, absolutely yes." Josette got to her knees and gave her best puppy dog eyes that Soran tried to ignore, but was already failing. "My loving uncle--"

"You don't need another dress."

"Listen, my future love life is at stake."

"Ask your parents."

"They'll say no."

"Are you claiming that I will obviously say yes?"

Josette smiled. Her eyes glistened. She blinked her big doe eyes up at him, smiling, tapping her fingers against his lap, giggling when his stern facade

cracked into a goofy grin.

Soran groaned. "Go to town. Get whatever you want."

Soran was practically tackled then smothered with kisses, but he smiled all the while.

"Thank you, thank you! I'll bring her to the estate soon. I'm sure you'll love her!" Another kiss and Josette was gone, leaving Soran smiling in her wake.

"Get a new book for Annalee while you're out! I'm leaving for business tomorrow morning!" Soran called, hearing a chirped "ok" follow.

The following day came and Soran left on a week-long business trip to the mines of Isabe, unaware that a mere three days after he left, Aeven paid the Makai estate a visit. Since Josette hadn't come to him, he went to see her. Kailyn and Lamaria were in town for one of their dates and the children were at home with the servants, incapable of saying no to the king and his guards.

Josette was right to feel unsettled around Aeven. He was cocky, entitled, and easily angered. He hadn't been king a year and already citizens were referring to him as mad. And though Josette did all she could that summer afternoon to make him comfortable, the king showed his true colors in a violent display that was the catalyst for even worse to come.

✝✝✝

So now we know what Quelen meant by Soran willingly letting others experiment on him. He worked with The Academy in hopes to find a way to destroy vampires and now...we get to watch his happiness slip away, MUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! *cough* I mean, oh noooooo~

✝Sixty-Two✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Warning: Implications of sexual assault, violence & some gore

Aeven sat on the couch of the lounge, his shirt abandoned on the floor next to a tattered dress. Josette lay bare on the floor cold eyes peering up at the ceiling, her neck covered in a gruesome bruise. Her hair was black as night against the pale blue rug. Once bright green eyes were now dull. The only sound came from the breeze through the open window and Aeven's own labored breaths that were slowing as he came down.

Blue eyes danced over his crime that, had she been the niece of only a duke, would have been easy to brush off. Pay the duke to shut them up, threaten to kill everyone they loved and be on his way. But that time Aeven knew his anger had gotten the better of him. Too rough, too much too fast, a girl that struggled and fought and pissed him off, and she would be his end. Soran would not allow Aeven to live. The king suspected, in time, Soran would come for his head. His research into vilis was leading somewhere, unbeknownst to Soran. However, he had managed to excel his own death warrant. His head would be on a spike and there was nothing he, the king, could do about it. Was he not the ruler? Did he not have power? Against Soran, no. No one did, and Aeven hated that because he was greedy, because he wanted power. He wanted the last word, or the last laugh.

"Lionel," called Aeven, continuing to stare at Josette when Lionel stepped into the room.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"How many are at this estate?"

"Pardon?"

"Workers and the Makai family, how many?"

"There are two other children and their parents are out. I counted seven workers here thus far, why?"

"Kill them."

Lionel paused, hoping Aeven to laugh it off as a bad joke. He wouldn't put it past the boy, but that never happened. Aeven only faced Lionel with a cold gaze as he asked, "Did you not hear me?"

"I did, Your Majesty, but...why?"

"Can't you take a guess?" Aeven gestured to Josette when standing. He leaned over her to retrieve his shirt, slipping it back on and half tucking it in. "The beast will not let any of us live for this. He will kill me for my actions and you for your inaction and, I don't know about you, but I don't much care for going down without a fight."

"This is not a fight, but a slaughter," said Lionel, flinching when Aeven rounded the couch with a raised dagger. He pressed it against Lionel's neck, drawing a sliver of blood.

"Order the men to kill on sight." Aeven walked around Lionel. "Where were the siblings again? Outside playing?"

Aeven disappeared in search of his next victims while Soran listened to another board meeting in Isabe, completely unaware of the terror befalling his family.

Only three days passed and Soran was on his way home a day early with work done and gifts to give. But when the carriage pulled up to the estate, no one was there to greet him and the smell--the smell was horrendous.

"Your Grace, are you alright?" asked Mich, his carriage driver, who was quickly left behind. "Your Grace!"

In a panic, Soran burst through the front doors only to find Kailyn and Lamaria's decomposing corpses in the foyer. Kailyn lay a broken warrior, sword across the room, body gashed up and scarred. Lamaria rested wide-

eyed on the stairs, horror and sorrow forever etched into her features. Soran let out the whimpered cry of a broken animal, taking in the sight of his beloved family's grotesque forms. Then a choked gasp, a glimmer of useless hope and moments of prayer as he ascended the stairs, screaming, "Annalee!"

Stacia, a maid there for a decade, lay dead in the hallway in a pool of her own blood. Soran stumbled around her, tearing at his hair.

"Jeyton!"

Bedroom doors were slammed open. Empty. All of them.

"Josette!"

Podrick, the first and only cook at the estate, was burned almost beyond recognition in the kitchen. Soran gagged at the smell, continuing to stumble about empty and silent halls that were closing in.

"Please, please, where are you?! Come out!"

Soran burst into the lounge and dropped to his knees when finding Josette's naked and maggot infested corpse on the rug. The world came crashing down and Soran's shrill scream shattered every piece of glass in a powerful blast. And still, Annalee and Jeyton were missing.

"Annalee, Jeyton!" Soran whimpered in desperate pleas, running to the last place he had yet to check; the garden.

There, on the sidewalk, a drop of blood then more and more, a trail. Soran followed, desperate, shaking his head as if to deny what his eyes saw. More blood, signs of a fight, of a sword and large footsteps in the dirt mixed with one's much smaller. That desperation grew until Soran was shaking, even more so when he came across the flower patch where Jeyton and Annalee laid cold and bloody in each other's arms among the daisies.

The flowers faded into gray ash as the earth trembled and the sky cried in flashes of lightning across a deep black sky. Soran fell, kicking up dust that

swirled into a typhoon around his silent form. Tears cut through ash on pale cheeks, dripped onto trembling hands that reached out to caress once warm cheeks.

The skin was cold. The smell was sickening. The ground was a deep, gruesome brownish red. Jeyton kept his promise, covered in gashes like a cut up pig, sword still in his grasp. And Annalee was gone in a single cut across her throat, eyes wide open, looking directly at Soran as if to tell him who was truly at fault.

Gone.

All of them.

Friends.

Family.

Dead.

Soran was alone with nothing to care for and nothing to lose.

And so he rose up, a twisted nether within an ashen sky that barrelled through the gates of the castle with a whistled cry. It was not a guess, but a scent that drove Soran there. The scent of blood on the cobblestones in the garden and mixed in with Josette's corpse that drove him to the palace where the Baylor family feasted, blissfully unaware of their soon to be fate. All flinched in horror when a shadowy figure whipped through the doors, casting the room in night. Soran was no more than a shadow himself, standing at the end of the long table with only red eyes glistening in the dark.

"Ah, Soran, I was waiting for you!" cheered Aeven in his drunken stupor. He swayed out of his seat with a mad grin. "Although, mm, I think you're a day early?"

Soran rounded the table, taking slow steps past trembling nobles when he asked in a growl, "Why?"

"Why what?"

Soran appeared at Aeven's side, claws gripping at the bastard's nap when he howled, "You know damn well what!"

"Right, right, I do, I apologize." Aeven slapped Soran's wrist like they were old friends and smiled. "Well, a dead man should be honest, don't you agree?" Aeven hummed and swayed. "If you were anyone different, I would have spared them."

Soran froze.

"But because you're...you, well, I knew you wouldn't let me live. The great vampire, Soran Makai, capable of doing whatever he wishes, much like I just did to your family. We're not so different, don't you think?" Aeven took a long drink, wine sloshing past his red lips. "I wanted to make sure that you knew that death was by no means the most painful truth. Living, now that is far more painful, wouldn't you--"

Soran sunk sharp fangs into Aeven's throat, tearing flesh from bones so blood rained like a cool spring shower. The nobles cried out in terror when witnessing their king go limp, coughing up blood until Soran dropped his corpse on the table.

There was nothing left to care for.

The doors closed and the Baylors screamed, banging uselessly against their tomb. Some stood their ground, swords drawn, swords that melted like iron in a forge, peeling the skin from their hands, or shattering them in an attempt to pierce the beast that twisted into a grotesque form of neither man nor beast. Soran spared no one, the taste of fresh blood and endless anger that once lay forgotten had returned full force, and that time he was alone.

There was no Kailyn to stop him from slaughtering every stuck up noble at the castle. And no Lamaria to tell him it was alright to cry if he was hurting so instead he ran and slashed and devoured.

There was nothing left to lose.

The castle was in flames, cracked stone, shattered glass, bloodstained halls until only a few bastard children left to die while the nobles attempted to flee remained huddled together on the lawn. A boy with deep brown eyes and dark black hair whimpered at the sight of Soran who admired him from afar, half expecting the boy to morph into his Jeyton and smile at him.

But there was no Jeyton to smile at him. No Josette to give him puppy dog eyes. No Annalee to beg for bedtime stories.

No family.

Nothing.

Only him and the rage and the sorrow, everlasting rage and sorrow, all because of who he was.

"Because you're...you, well, I knew you wouldn't let me live. The great vampire, Soran Makai, capable of doing whatever he wishes, much like I just did to your family. We're not so different, don't you think?"

Perhaps not.

Perhaps Aeven and Soran were quite similar because Soran was feeling mad. Mad enough to tear through the streets of Vashna as a demon of the night. Roads were shattered, homes caved in, and upon entering The Academy Soran discovered further treachery. He had thought too little of Aeven and mortals for they were getting further in their research than expected.

Priests, under Aeven's orders, were experimenting on youths in an attempt to create mortals a step closer to vampires. In doing so, many mutated into a strange being somewhere between human and Unborn. Soran ended their terror and ended those that had done it. He didn't hesitate to burn away the archives, tear apart every last text on vilis then work on the prestigious academy, rip it apart brick by brick until it was but rubble and ash atop burnt soil. The citizens fled the city in terror, watching homes go up in flames, smoke rise and ash fall.

Soran lay his family and friends to rest, alone. He built their pyres, disgusted by the idea of them continuing to rot. He wrapped them and set them atop wood and oil. He watched them burn, and he hated everything and everyone.

The Baylors. The Academy. Humans and their greed and their vanity and their ignorance. But most of all, he hated himself.

It was his fault they were dead, even Aeven admitted it. Because Soran was Soran, because he was a vampire there would never be a time to rest. Aeven was right, not that Soran needed to hear it. He always knew that living was far more painful than dying.

The Kasine militia soon came to aid the capital, priests and knights gathered to battle. Soran showed them strength, showed them power that they could never wield. Anger and sorrow that festered into one blow, a static mass of red and black in the sky, twisting clouds and lightning that shot forth in a ray of light that turned all to ash. The land cracked, a deep crevice to remind everyone what Soran was capable of, and to remind himself that even with all that power, he still couldn't protect the ones he loved.

Gone.

All of them.

Friends.

Family.

Dead.

There was nothing left to care for.

There was nothing left to lose.

Soran was alone.

✝✝✝

There you have it, how Soran lost his family in a single night and how he killed... a lot of people. Next chapter will return to the present, Wallie's P.O.V. I hope you still enjoyed even if there was...a lot of bad that happened >.> I cried a lot when writing it Dx Anyways, what did you think of this, uh, terrible tragedy? Are you surprised how and why it happened? Do you understand Soran more now that you know all the specifics?

✝Sixty-Three✝

Wallie P.O.V.

"I left for a while," Soran adds and although there are no tears, I know it has nothing to do with not wanting to cry, but more so with having cried so much that there are no tears left. That's alright, I'm crying for him.

"I didn't care about people, feeding when and how I wished, uncaring if they died or not. I became the vampire that made humans cower in the night. I traveled in search of the knowledge Aeven shared with others, destroyed it and any who knew it when found. Vashna was without me for about sixty years. I couldn't--" Soran's hand trembles.

"I couldn't be here, so I just paid some to care for the estate and my business' while I saw the world. But time kept passing and the world changed while I stayed the same. It was exhausting, and I hated that I didn't belong anywhere or to anyone." Then Soran sits up, heaves a great breath, and wears a sad smile. "But I realized that, out of every place I visited, this is the only one that still felt like home. Although I lost them here, I also gained them here. Kailyn sang to me here. Lamaria taught me here. Josette, Jeyton and Annalee were born across the hall. We played and I read them stories, all of that in this place. If I had to be anywhere, I wanted to be here. My family was taken from me, but I wasn't, and I'm not, about to let anyone take our home too."

"A childish thought, don't you agree?" asks Soran, snorting when all I can do is shake my head in response. His sad eyes bore into my own, tearing away at my chest that aches as the words lodge in my throat. "I can't tell you how many I've killed in my life, Wallie. I can't tell you how many lives I've ruined because there was a time where I really didn't give a damn...honestly, there are still moments now where I don't care. I'm sometimes too tired to care. Being what I am, there are consequences that others cannot even begin to fathom and for you, one that others will see I care for, those consequences will become yours as well. You've seen that

already, felt the wrath of others. Do you want that? Is it a fate you can face and accept?"

That's a heavy question, one that Soran has been attempting to make me realize for some time now. While I've always known Soran's past to be deep and filled with horror, I never could have imagined the truth. Even now, he has only shared the first 70 or so years of his life when there are still 1500 more that are likely similar. Bitter, angry, sad; they are emotions that none can deny Soran deserves to feel, and yet my answer remains the same.

"It's a little late to be asking that now, isn't it?" I attempt to tease with a smile that he doesn't return. "You said it yourself, these feelings aren't going anywhere. Your past doesn't change that for me either. Call me naive if you wish, maybe even a fool, but you're stuck with this fool."

At least that earns a half smile, one that disappears as quick as it came.

"I'm so sorry about what happened to them, to you and your family. Neither you or them deserved that sort of suffering. I know my words don't really mean much--"

Soran interrupts, "They mean more than you think. I appreciate it, your words and you listening."

"I'll always listen, whether it's a memory of your past, troubles of today or tomorrow, I'm here for you." I'm happy that Soran responds to my smile with one of his own this time. He grips my hand so tightly I fear it'll bruise, but I don't pull away because I honestly believe Soran needed to hear that.

How long has he been alone without someone to be by his side? How long has he not spoken of the past? As terrifying as it is, there are moments where he probably needs to get these horrors off his chest and I'm willing to do what I can to help.

"You're one of a kind, Wallie," he says while wearing that smile. "Sometimes I question how you can be."

"Some of us are just born with a natural advantage, I guess," I tease, grinning at the chuckle I manage to get from him. "Thanks for telling me. I know it must be hard to talk about."

Soran slowly nods. I scoot a little closer. He raises a brow then stiffens when I lean in for a chaste kiss.

I smile at his shocked expression, eyes blinking rapidly like he honestly didn't believe I'd go in for a kiss. Maybe he didn't, maybe deep down he thought I was repulsed, who really knows. But the kiss is enough proof for Soran seeing as he leans in for another. A kiss as exciting as the first with his hand reaching up to caress my cheek, the gentle touch of a supposed monster.

When we pull apart, Soran brushes the hair from my eyes. His hands are cold; the touch is nothing but warm though. His fingers continue to play with strands of my hair, a sensation that I hope to feel time and time again. I could get used to this, could drown in these little moments with him, and if that isn't hopeless then I don't know what else is.

"Sorry to linger on serious subjects, but did you know them?" I end up asking. "Those that captured me. You knew Allvar's name without my telling you so, who were they and what did they want?"

Soran scowls at the mention of Allvar's name. His eyes darken, but he responds immediately, "Allvar is the War General of Leschandeal, a renowned warrior working for Emperor Rico Pihre. Unlike the Baylor's, the crown of Leschandeal does not crave immortality and power, at least not that of a vampire. While the Baylor's have gone back and forth between wishing to know more and wanting nothing to do with those like me, the Pihre's have stood firm in their belief to rid the world of vampires completely. They used you as bait to get to me, hoping that their ritual would result in my capture, at least in a paralysis like the Baylor's put me in before. Obviously they did not succeed."

"But they'll try again?"

"Not anytime soon. I've dealt them a heavy blow, proven their work has been for naught, but eventually they will return."

"Why didn't it work? The spell, I mean."

"Because all the truths the Baylor's once had were destroyed by my own hands. They have theories that they must test and hope they don't fail. This time they were confident when they shouldn't have been."

"Why let them?" I ask, causing Soran to raise a curious brow. "If they continue to test, will they not one day find the answer?"

"What would you have me do then? Kill all the royals of Leschandeal?"

That is a good question that has me pursing my lips. Soran chuckles, dropping his hand from my hair to fall into his lap. His eyes are heavy, blinking slow like he's fighting off sleep. I imagine he is. After what has happened, he must be exhausted.

"You remember what happened in Isabe, don't you?" He asks. "Those that stole from my company, how I punished them, because at this point there is nothing else I can do. I've tried diplomatic approaches and I've tried committing heinous acts that have gone down in history and yet still no one will leave me alone. Maybe you should be the one calling me naive or a fool, but I don't plan to be like Karsissia and butcher everyone, treat them like nothing more than dirt. Besides, should their knowledge grow to the point that it is worrisome, trust that Karsissia will handle them."

Speaking of the other vampires, although Soran is tired, he's actually answering my questions so I go on to ask, "What about Karsissia and Quelen?"

"Hmm?"

"Why didn't they help?" I gesture outside the window. "Janika, you said she is Quelen's familiar. Why didn't either of them come with you to help?"

Soran actually laughs, but it is no way amused. He shakes his head when responding, "Trust that you would be in more trouble had they come. Karsissia and Quelen could be considered friends, in a manner, but the three of us together are nothing more than comrades. We happen to all be vampires and agree that we don't want more to be created. Neither will help unless it benefits them in the long run." Soran nods towards the window. "Janika even, I only got Quelen to agree because he owes me a favor, otherwise I would have gone in completely alone."

"What about Malatis?" I ask, going wide-eyed at the memory of the creature. I believe it was Nawa that mentioned he was alive, but he could be lying. "He's alive, right?"

Soran thankfully nods. "Returned to The Veil. I will have to keep my strength up considering the situation now so I will summon him another time. Do you have more questions?"

"Plenty. They seem endless."

"Hmm."

"But I guess, instead of a question I'll make a request. Will you teach me to use magic?"

Soran is taken aback enough that he actually leans away.

"I doubt I could stand up to a war general or a high priest, but if I can learn some defensive spells at the very least, wouldn't that be helpful for the both of us?" I give a hopeful smile.

I'm surprised Soran doesn't take longer to think about it when he responds, "It certainly wouldn't do any harm, so long as you understand that even after learning, you must run. Those that come here, that want to harm me and therefore you, they are more skilled, have more training. Any defense you learn can be easily broken so use it as a distraction, do not expect to defeat them."

Even if I know he's right, I can't deny that stings a little. I want to be more. I want to be able to defend myself fully against an attack so Soran won't have to do all the work or continuously worry. That will take time though, if Soran is willing to teach me then I'll go all in. I'll work until I can at least put up a fight, so I'm not dragged away with ease. I won't be useless. Never again.

"You should rest," I tell him, watching how his eyes are truly struggling to stay open. "When you're feeling up to it, you can teach me a few tricks."

"It's been a while since I've taught anything. I may be a tad rusty."

"I've never been taught magic so we can struggle through it together."

Soran snorts. "What is my payment then?"

"Huh?"

"A teacher should be paid, should they not?"

"Wow, is that how this is going to be?"

Soran hums, his eyes blinking slowly with exhaustion. I shout in surprise when he pulls me into the bed with him, the sheets twisting around my legs. My heart is hammering in my chest when his arms coil around my waist, face burying itself into the nape of my neck. His breath is hot, or maybe that's only me. I have no idea as the breath catches in my throat, as my entire body shivers feeling him against me.

"Consider this the first payment," he whispers, pressing a kiss to my neck, one that has me squirming in his grasp. He must find amusement in it because he chuckles. "Stay here and rest with me."

I don't know if I can rest when he's this close. How the hell am I meant to sleep when he's surrounding me? Soran's bedroom. His scent. His body on mine. His arms around my waist. Every breath tickling the hairs on my neck. My toes curl in my socks and my legs squirm until he entangles them with his own. I never believed Soran to be a cuddler, but damn it, I both

love and hate that he is! This is exciting and embarrassing all at once, damn you!

"Is it alright if I stay here?" I mumble. "If I don't return to my room, others may suspect."

"You were just kidnapped, rescued by me, and immediately brought to my room. I believe it's safe to assume, others already suspect."

"And that is...ok?"

"Were you not the one adamant that we will not run from these feelings?"

My entire body is probably red with a blush. When Soran says it, it makes them all the more real, as if they weren't before.

"Well, yeah, but...you were avoiding it a-and suddenly we're cuddling."

"Does that bother you?" he asks, about to pull away but I swiftly grab his arms, locking them in place.

"No!"

I feel Soran's smirk against the back of my neck.

"I'm only saying that you've changed your mind rather quickly," I grumble, rubbing my fingers against his skin. I can't say that I haven't imagined us like this, but no dream could possibly live up to the real deal.

"My worries remain," he says with a heavy sigh. "I wish I could promise your safety, but I am not foolish enough to do so."

Understandable and, oddly enough, that doesn't make me feel bad.

"I can't say that I'm entirely comfortable either. The idea of others knowing, although it's obvious they already do, frightens me. I've seen cruelty, felt it myself, fear the same being done to you. Unfortunately, the only consolation I can give is that, should it happen, I will return the favor a thousand times over." Soran's hold tightens, as if he's attempting to

apologize for the future he fears. I gently stroke his arm in response until the tension eases.

"Rather than only fret, rather than deny and cause us both more pain, I do agree that at least this way we have each other," he adds, only worsening my full body blush. "This puts me at ease."

"This? You mean cuddling?" I tease, hoping to lighten the mood, which works judging by his chuckle.

"If you continue to tease, I will stop."

"Oh no, we wouldn't want that."

He attempts to pull away, but I quickly turn in his arms. He's wearing a soft smile, one now pointed at me, one that I easily return. I wrap my arms around him, resting my head on a shared pillow. Although his eyes are pure crimson, a red most would find frightening, I only see them as warm. An almost soothing fire that never burns, only holds me in a warm embrace.

Soran kisses me, holds me close, presses another kiss to my cheek and my forehead while all I can do is blush. He must notice this but says nothing, only breathes in a slow breath, as if physically taking in the moment. I do the same when snuggling beneath the blankets with him.

Here, exhaustion sets in. Suddenly all that has happened has hit me hard and I, too, feel the urge to sleep. That sleep takes me only moments after the sensation of Soran's fingers combing through my hair.

✝✝✝

YOU ADORABLE SACKS OF GARBAGE! *flips table* THE FLUFF WAS NECESSARY OK?! EVEN I WAS CRAVING SOME lol but yay for Wallie finally knowing the truth? And yay for Soran agreeing to teach him to use magic? :D Our boys are back and better than ever because there's no more pretending like there aren't feelings, y'all are hopeless and I love it~

✝Sixty-Four✝

I awaken in a similar position I fell asleep in, only Soran is on his back with me resting atop him. Even after last night, I can't beat back a blush. One of Soran's arms remains around my waist, the other is on my shoulder blade. His fingers twitch in his sleep, nose wiggles cutely then he calms.

Shit, am I being a creep by laying here watching him sleep? I don't want to wake him though. I don't know what time it is. My eyes are crusted over with sleep. The construction crew must already be here though, there's chatter outside accompanied by the sound of hammers nearby. Light slips through the curtains.

I'll wait a bit longer.

Resting my head on Soran's chest, I hear the slow rhythm of his heart. Tales always said vampires didn't have one, a heartbeat, but I certainly hear the soft thumping. However, I do think it's a tad slower than my own. His skin is colder too, paler, but there's warmth. His skin breaks out in goosebumps when my fingertips graze over his arm. He shivers when I press a kiss to his neck, all the normal reactions of a perfectly normal person.

Closing my eyes, I wait patiently for Soran to awaken, but then I get restless. He has yet to show any signs of getting up. I've heard others in the hall. If anyone has knocked then it was before I woke up. I really have to go to the bathroom and my stomach is ready to devour my innards if I don't get some damn food.

I try to squirm out of Soran's grasp. Thankfully his grip is loose because he must be completely out. He barely stirs when I sit up, really only pulling the blankets closer since, even unconscious, he can tell that it's colder. I pull the blankets up to his shoulders and he finally moves, but only to roll onto his side towards me. I comb my fingers through his hair, placing another kiss to his temple. He smiles in his sleep.

My stomach growling reminds me why I left Soran's embrace in the first place. Wonder if there's breakfast left? I'm starving! Thinking about it, I had that soup yesterday and that was it. My stomach practically kicks me with the next growl.

I use the bathroom first then head to leave. At the door, I hesitate when realization hits me. What do I say to my friends, my co-workers? Damn, didn't really think about that. If they are at least suspecting of my relationship with Soran then they will definitely know it today seeing as I did kind of...sleep in his bed with him. Should I lie and say I slept on the couch? Does it even matter?

Ok, ok, we'll have to figure that out later. For now, food.

The main hall is relatively fine, some missing pictures and scuffed up rugs, but doors to guest bedrooms are open revealing missing windows, tattered curtains, signs of the struggle. Everyone must be busy attempting to clean what they can or helping to discover what needs removed and replaced. I can't believe I slept in when we have so much to do!

On the way to the kitchens, I spot Elamir walking with a basket of ruined curtains and know immediately that things are different. I smile at her. She smiles back, but it's almost hesitant, like she isn't certain if she can. She gives a sort of half bow and says, "Good morning."

"Morning."

"How...are you feeling?" she nervously asks. She looks about the hall as if searching for an escape. Understandable, I want to escape too.

"Better after a good night's sleep-" ah, maybe I shouldn't have mentioned sleeping because Elamir's eyes darted behind me to Soran's bedroom. She nods so I'm quick to ask, "Uh, is there any breakfast left?"

"No, but there's lunch." She suddenly bites her lip when asking, "Uh, I'm sorry, I can go get you some?"

"No, no, no," I quickly reply, realizing that Elamir really is confused. I guess I can't blame her. Right now, she doesn't see me as Wallie, her friend and co-worker, but Wallie, the guy that is involved with her very rich and very powerful and very immortal vampire boss.

"I'm sorry I missed so much work. Once I eat lunch and get changed, I'll pick up whatever duties are left," I say, hoping that informs her that nothing has actually changed.

"You don't have to. You had quite the ordeal, I bet. Higra will probably agree to give you a day off."

"I rather work, thanks though!" I rush downstairs before Elamir can argue.

Downstairs the front doors are wide open. Movers are mixed in with our staff, helping take out any ruined furniture. I imagine Soran will have to look over what he wants replaced or changed seeing as a lot has been damaged. Wonder if he will though, or leave it to Higra, either way, there's plenty of extra people that results in my presence going mostly unseen. Janein spots me and, like Elamir, she gives a nervous bow. She's busy though so that's all I get.

Nothing really changes after eating either. I get changed and find Higra to request work seeing as everyone else I asked were insistent that they could handle it and I should rest. Higra is the only one that gives me orders, although even she's hesitant about that.

"What did the doctor say after your check up?" she asks. I'm tempted to lie, but her narrow eyes state she is willing to wake Soran and ask him.

"I'm not meant to do any intense physical labor for a few days and contact him if I'm feeling unusually tired."

Higra hums. She observes the yard before giving orders to help move furniture. I can't carry any of it, but I help guide the movers and make sure no one takes a nasty fall down the stairs. The work is better than nothing and I keep it up for the next four hours until break time where I find myself sitting in the front lawn.

Soran still hasn't woken up. I look up to his window from here, wondering if he has even noticed I'm gone. Suppose between the two of us though, he needs far more rest than me. I'll go check on him in a moment, right now, a familiar face is being allowed a break too. When I catch Hael's gaze, I wave him over, frowning a bit at his hesitancy as well.

Slowly, Hael takes a seat at my side, long hair pulled up into a tight ponytail. He's quiet, not looking at me until he finally says, "I'm glad you're ok."

"Me too."

This is awkward. I'm not sure how I expected Hael, or anyone for that matter, to react.

"I'm assuming you weren't hurt then?" he asks.

"Nope, I'm fine and more than ready to get back to work."

"Ah...having difficulty with that?" He asks. I'm not surprised he caught on seeing as he, too, is acting awkwardly like everyone else.

I let out a heavy sigh. "Has anyone...said anything to you?"

"Everyone has had something to say."

"Do I want to know?"

"Probably not, although it's not so much rude but rather telling that things won't be the same."

"Can I fix that?" I ask, gnawing at my bottom lip. Hael shrugs.

"Doubtful," he answers. "Everyone is of the belief that you are seeing Lord Makai."

I am about to bite through my lip, I swear. To prove Hael's point, Enith catches my gaze across the yard. He visibly stiffens, full on bows then rushes inside with a few others completely avoiding looking at me. I'm sure

Hael is being nice by leaving stuff out. I can only imagine what others think of me, a human being with a vampire. They've made their thoughts of Soran very well known so I wonder how their perception of me has changed now.

"Are you?" Hael suddenly asks after my long silence.

"What?"

"Seeing him."

Hael doesn't need to ask. Like Soran said, everyone suspects because all the clues point to that being the case. All are aware that Soran and I were close before, that I was closer than anyone else so this is an outcome they can believe. I could lie through my teeth, but what's the point?

"Yes," I answer, fearful of Hael's response, which is silence. A warm breeze blows in, more signs of spring staying here for good. Unfortunately, the grass that was slowly growing has mostly been burned. The trees around the estate are mostly dead from the fires. The landscapers have returned to see what can or can't be salvaged.

Hael and I watch them, me nervously waiting for a response, as if I'm hoping for his blessing or some shit. When that never happens, I ask, "Well?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"It bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Do you want me to seriously answer that?"

"I guess it depends on how harsh your answer is?"

At least that gets a smirk and a quiet chuckle. He shakes his head, ruffles his long hair and sighs. "He's a vampire, Wallie."

"He's a good man."

"You've seen him kill people."

"You'd be singing a different tune if you knew even half of what happened to him, what has really happened to him."

"Perhaps," Hael whispers. His tone of disbelief is obvious but I make no comment. "Take being a vampire away then, he's still our boss. Neither of us even have a home. The estate is our home. Do you know the kind of predicament you're in?"

"It's not as if I haven't thought about it," I mumble like a child that got scolded for doing something they knew was bad.

"Say things go south, say this doesn't work, you're stuck here with him. He pays you. Houses you, and us too. Say one of us angers you and that angers Lord Makai, we could get fired. Now everyone is going to tiptoe around you. Even me-" Hael pats his own chest. "For what I'm saying, if that angers you or Lord Makai, I could lose my home and my job."

It's not as if I haven't considered this myself, the fact that Soran is my employer, but I never thought about it so thoroughly. To think Hael, to think everyone, is worried about that. That's unfair to them, having to now consider everything they say to me. I'm not that petty, at least I'd like to think that I am. I don't want my relationship with Soran to affect work, but I don't want to give him up either.

"I'm sorry," I say to which Hael shakes his head.

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad. I should have said that better, and I'm not apologizing for the previous reason either," he says quickly around a sigh that shows he's as troubled with this conversation as I am. "You're my friend, Wallie, so if you're happy that's great, but...but I definitely think it's a bad idea in more ways than one."

With that, Hael pats my shoulder, gives an apologetic smile then gets up to return to work.

I fall back with a heavy sigh, hands over my face. This situation is far more complicated than expected.

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"Wallace, His Grace is calling for you," says Higra, successfully making all the staff in the kitchen visibly stiff. I kind of hate her for it.

Slowly, I rise. Hael is the only one sitting with me. Everyone else has put distance and even the chatter has been more quiet than usual for dinner. I'm grateful to get out of there, brushing past Higra with my head down and cheeks red with embarrassment and a bit of guilt.

While I'm glad Soran is finally up after sleeping almost the entire day away, I was kind of hoping he'd sleep a little longer. At least let me compose myself. I don't really want to mention anything about work yet.

My pace quickens until I'm stepping into Soran's room, smiling upon seeing him. He must have just woken up because his eyes are still squinted with sleep. He has yet to get dressed, remaining in bed with the blankets around his waist. The most that's been done is his hair, but he clearly just brushed it with his fingers.

"Good morning," I say when walking over to him, smiling at his outstretched hand that I take a hold of immediately. "Or rather, good evening."

Soran hums, guiding me to sit on the side of the bed. I interlock our fingers, leaning in to kiss his cheek while he rubs his tired eyes.

"Higra informed me that you returned to work. You should have rested today," he says.

"I rather work, helps keep my mind off things."

"How are you feeling? No light headedness?" Soran checks my temperature with his hand against my forehead. I have a feeling my cheeks are going to remain warm more times than not if he keeps up this kind of affection. That isn't a complaint either.
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"I only guided the movers so no physical labor just as the doctor ordered," I tell him.

"I'm surprised. You always struggle listening to my orders."

"Are you complaining?"

"No." Soran rests against the headboard, eyes half mast. "If you had, I suppose we wouldn't be like this."

"Do you want me to get you anything? Tea? A snack?" I ask, noticing how he still appears tired. I imagine he'll go right back to bed soon.

Before Soran can respond though, there's a knock at the door. Layne steps in with tea, smiling at the both of us. I hate how I almost pull my hand away from Soran's. I wonder if I would have if our fingers weren't interlocked.

Layne sits the tea on the bedside table opposite to me. There's only one cup and he's quick to apologize, "I will retrieve another glass."

"No, I'm fine," I tell him with a wide smile that he returns. "Uh, I'll pour the tea and if His Grace wants anything else, I'll get it."

Layne actually looks surprised to hear me say His Grace. Soran does too. But Layne leaves and, once he's gone, I face Soran to see his curious stare.

"I'm not calling you Soran around them," I tell him before he even has to ask, which has him chuckling. Then I'm up to pour him some tea because, damn it, this is still my job! And yeah, it's weird, but I'm going to do what I've always done and hope for the best.

"The estate is a mess," I say while Soran enjoys his warm beverage. Must be waking him because he's sitting up straight and his eyes are fully open. "I didn't really get to look at it yesterday, but it kind of pisses me off."

Soran raises a brow.

"I live here too y'know. I may not own it, but this is home," I explain and, for some reason, that makes Soran smile.

"What?" I ask, curious about why he's grinning.

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

"Says the smirking man."

"I smirk often."

"Because you're often a jackass."

Soran chuckles. "I suppose I cannot deny that."

"You definitely can't."

But Soran's smile falls when he passes his cup to me. I place it on the end stand, flinching when he asks, "Did anyone say anything today?"

"About?"

Soran's quiet stare is enough to inform me, but I play dumb.

"Wallie," he whispers. "Did anyone say anything?"

"Would you do anything if they did?"

Soran frowns. Yet again, his gaze says enough and I'm reminded of Hael's worries.

"I don't want everyone tiptoeing around me," I tell him, glad that he gives a slow nod. I wanted to talk about this another time, but it seems it can't be avoided. "Right now, no one is certain how to treat me. I get bows and extra assistance or avoidance so, out there--" I point to the door. "We need to act like an employer and employee so everyone understands to treat me the same. And in here--" I take his hand again. "Behind closed doors or away from the estate, we can be us...are you ok with that?"

"Public displays of affection have never been my forte anyways," he replies, facing me with a sad smile. Out of everyone, Soran knows what it's

like being treated like an outsider. Now, I'm stepping into his shoes, although my experience pales in comparison.

"As you wish, Wallie, but do not let them walk all over you. They will if you let them," he warns and I wonder if that is a warning for them too.

This is definitely a far more complicated situation than expected.

✝✝✝

Hey guys, sorry this is late. I was pretty busy yesterday and didn't manage to get this up and ready in time.

<u>IMPORTANT NOTICE</u>, I won't be updating this Wednesday. Why? I already informed my patrons of this, but I actually had a pretty big change of heart with this story and decided to take it in a different direction. Unfortunately, that means it's a bit messy in the outline and plot right now as quite a few changes have been made. That means initial ideas have been scrapped. I have no plans to edit or do much with this story (like publishing or even Tapas premium wise) so I admit I don't plan to go through and fix everything, but I do want to try my best to tie everything up by the end, which won't be for a while, no worries. I'll explain the original ending and ideas in the Q&A, but long story short, I want to take next week to work on it more since I've been feeling a bit down about the giant quality drop this story has taken. I don't want to feel too stressed with a double update so, yeah.

Next update won't be until 5/16 so, technically, six days. This was a typical length chapter anyways so you kind of got the usual two updates lol So what do you think of Wallie's predicament at work? Will things work out?

✝Sixty-Five✝

A new dilemma has arrived.

How does one date their immortal vampire boss? Because, personally, I am at a loss.

I've dated before so I have some experience. In Chandri my first boyfriend was someone I had known almost all my life, but we didn't date until we were fifteen. He worked with his father as a blacksmith, long hours spent working in the hot summer over an even hotter forge. We used to play in the river as kids and complain about humid summer days the moment we had a break. There wasn't much to do in a small town so dating consisted of spending time after work, perhaps taking a walk down old dirt roads or sitting in fields counting stars, which is in no way a complaint. We dated for two years and maybe we would have kept dating if his family hadn't moved to a bigger town after his father got an offer to open up a shop.

Second boyfriend wasn't much of a boyfriend, one of those guys that I had a spark with that was so intense that it felt like love, but it burned out almost as quickly as it started. Two months later we were at each other's throats, and not in a good way. Didn't really date again after that, saw someone here or there, but the thing is--all of them were human, of the same or similar social class and, obviously, not my boss.

Acting like employer and employee has actually been easier than being together. I got up this morning wondering if I would be the one to attend Soran, but it was Layne. I admit there was a sliver of disappointment watching Layne ascend the stairs with Soran's morning tea, but I understood then wondered if perhaps that would be weird? Having his partner serve him, even if I have up to this point, might make Soran uncomfortable. Hell, it might make me a little uncomfortable, I'm not really sure. Layne and Higra have been with Soran the longest though and, considering the mess that the estate is in, there's a lot of work to be done.

So I ate breakfast with Hael then got to work.

The estate is busy yet again with movers, painters, carpenters and more. Moldings have been cracked, stairs splintered. Once elegant walkways have become worn as if aged a hundred years. Some are still sweeping up glass or brushing away dust. The landscapers probably have it the worst though. Sidewalks have been crushed to dust, once lush gardens burned to ash, even the fountain in the garden has crumbled, laying as rubble in murky water.

I spotted Soran three times throughout the day, but he was busy either speaking with Higra and Layne or some of the workers. I never said hello. I wasn't even sure he spotted me because he never said hello either before he disappeared. Now the day is almost over and I'm wondering what to do next.

Is it alright to go see him? Is he busy? Does he want me to visit? I can't lie and say that I don't want to. I would like to see him, to spend only a few moments together even if I haven't a clue what to talk about. Suddenly, there's a wall, one that reminds me of our positions. I want to laugh at myself for being so ridiculous. When do we stop being an employer and employee? Is there some type of timestamp we need for that because I honestly don't know. This was even my request but I'm totally lost!

It's for the best though. Today was no different than yesterday. Everyone is cautious with me, seeming not to know where the line is. Cool, cool, I get the feeling. I'm wondering where that line is too, although in this case it has to do with me and Soran. I totally get why people say not to date your boss, this shit is confusing.

"Ah, Wallie!" Layne calls. He comes down the hall with a slightly awkward smile that I do my best not to return, well, I return the smile, but hopefully it isn't awkward.

"I was looking for you," he says. "Lord Makai wishes to see you."

My heart skips a beat.

"Oh, uh, ok, I'll go up once I take this to Higra." I hold up the papers that Elamir gave to me earlier. Apparently it's a list of any unaccounted for items, not sure if that's because they think some are still missing/broken or perhaps someone stole during the chaos. I wouldn't put it past some people.

Layne leaves without another word. Higra hasn't much to say either. She takes the papers, gives me a rather telling look; you must be crazy, boy, then sends me on my way. Impressive how Higra manages to say so much with a single gaze. I wish I knew how to do that.

The walk to Soran's office is a mix between abnormally slow and almost a run. There are moments where I wish to see him and moments where I wonder what I'm meant to say. Does this request have to do with work or us? And if it has to do with us, what could it be?

Soran has always struggled with basic human interaction. Hell, I was told not to smile when I first arrived. Yet yesterday he was affectionate, we were affectionate. Was it due to the relief of what happened or does that mean he wants a relationship like that? Is holding hands or kissing when we see each other ok? What about cuddling? I admit, I'm a cuddler. I love sitting in front of a warm fire in my lover's arms, but I don't know if that's something Soran wants. Ah, the "getting to know what they like" portion of the relationship is riddled with troubles!

Our feelings are mutual, that is clear now. We're together, as complicated as it is, but there are still borders. Where those borders lies, what they truly are, I've yet to discover. I can only hope that we can cross them together, that Soran will open up more and more. I almost feel greedy, wishing to reach for even more when I already know so much. I almost feel wrong, and yet that doesn't change this desire to spend countless time with Soran until I know every damn thing about him.

The door to Soran's office is taunting me. All of a sudden, I swear the handle is smiling, but not a good smile. Where the hell are these nerves coming from? Hell, I slept in the same bed with him. We've kissed. I've been kidnapped. This should be child's play. You'd think my heart would be able to handle it. You'd think my palms wouldn't be sweating, but they are as I open the door, peering within to find Soran at his desk.

The windows have already been replaced, but the curtains are missing. Unfortunate, seeing as the view is not as great as it once was. There's a sea of ash behind, a reminder of what transpired. Once filled bookshelves are now empty or completely missing. Stacks of books rest along the edge of the room waiting to be put back or replaced. Mounds of new paperwork are on Soran's desk, likely bills or even sales pitches. By now there are probably dozens of businesses attempting to sell Soran their wares, at least I'm assuming the city knows about the attack. It was probably hard to miss.

Behind those mounds of paper is an obviously annoyed Soran. It's been a while since I've seen a frown like that, one similar to when I first arrived. The evil vampire overlord has retaken his throne, sitting there with a furrowed brow and a twisted snarl. He reads over another page, clicking his tongue before scribbling something and sitting it aside. It's then, when he looks up, that he catches my gaze. That furrowed brow is gone and the snarl is replaced with a kind smile that has me smiling back like the giddy fool that I am.

I'm reminded of what he told me about his past, his family, the obvious joy and happiness he had. I may not have seen him, but I wonder if he was like this, smiling so easily, laughing, loving without a care. Then those thoughts almost anger me, the idea of someone taking that away, of him being alone for so long. I want to make sure it doesn't happen again. I want to see that smile always.

"You wanted to see me?" I practically whisper, as if I'm fearful of what he has to say. Perhaps I am, perhaps I'm scared that I'll fall for him even more and that's a pretty scary thought because I thought I was bad already.

"You didn't have to come so soon," he answers. "You must be busy, there's a lot to do."

"There is, but I'm still not cleared to do any heavy lifting so I got off already. What about you?" I gesture to the paperwork when stepping closer.

Scanning over the pages, I can make out that my assumption was correct. There are sales pitches and orders, although I am only able to read bits and pieces.

"Looks like everyone is trying to get a chance to make something for the infamous Lord Makai," I tease, smiling at his eye roll. "They're so eager to speak with you when it makes them a profit."

"Of course. They're exhausting."

"Can I help with anything?"

Soran raises a brow.

"Maybe I can separate some papers or search for something?"

"I didn't call you here to give you more work," he answers, averting his gaze afterwards.

"What did you call me for then...Your Grace?"

Soran starts tapping his fingers against his desk when he mumbles, "Are you hungry?"

"Huh?"

"Are you hungry?" he repeats, refusing to meet my gaze when adding, "Do you...want to go into town...to have dinner?"

I'd give a response if I actually had one, but unfortunately, Wallie has lost all function and is now a frozen, mindless wad of useless flesh and bones.

"I understand if you don't want to. It may be uncomfortable for you," he says, reading over a few more pages. Maybe his actions would fool me into thinking he's totally fine, but I notice that his fingers are still tapping nervously on the desk.

He's nervous. Soran is nervous too. I like that and I almost hate that I like that, which has me chuckling. Soran must take my chuckle as something else though because he frowns, but before he can take back the offer, I stutter, "W-We can go! Um, I mean, I'd like to go."

The nervous tapping stops. Soran watches me with a quiet stare.

"We'll have to go somewhere I can afford though," I add.

"You aren't paying."

I'd argue, but the last time I tried that I still got a new suit, nice shoes and a fancy pocket watch. Speaking of which, glancing down, I wonder if I should change. Obviously there's the suit Soran bought me, but isn't that too fancy? Then there's my uniform, which can pass for nice attire, but I know it's a uniform. My everyday clothes sure as hell aren't up to par to whatever restaurant we're about to go to, and it seems my worries show.

"Is something wrong?" Soran asks.

"Should I change?" I mumble. "Is this ok to wear?"

For some reason, that makes him laugh, which only warms my face even more.

"What you're wearing is fine. I didn't think you were the type to worry over such things."

"Why not?" I cross my arms defiantly. "I like looking good."

"Then you shouldn't ever have to worry."

Excuse me, I think I just spontaneously combusted and Soran is only smiling about it.

I don't know what he does next seeing as I spin around on my heel and say, "I, uh, I'll get the carriage ready."

✝✝✝

Thanks for waiting, friends! We're back to the usual twice a week updates. I've done my best to go over the remaining chapters. Hopefully this keeps things moving. Anyways, smooth, Soran, real smooth~

✝Sixty-Six✝

The door shuts softly behind me. I wish my thoughts would mimic it because they are anything but soft. That sly bastard, and by sly bastard I mean adorable dork! What the hell am I meant to say to that?! That's a damn compliment and he knew it and I know it and now I'm blushing like crazy! I know I am. My entire body is on fire.

I take a chance to inspect my appearance in one of the guest bathrooms. Sure enough, my face is so red that I look sunburned. My hair sure as hell doesn't help, only brings out the color more. Splashing cold water on my face, I take a deep breath and say, "You got this, Wallie. You've had dinner with Soran before--"

Which ended when Cathen burst in...don't think about that!

I smack my face a few times. "Calm down. This is just a dinner date. It's nothing. It's fine. Stop freaking out."

But telling myself not to freak out is like forcing myself to freak out even more. By the time the carriage is ready I'm about to fake sick and hide beneath my blankets. I'm not given a chance to do that though seeing as Soran has arrived. He says something to Higra atop the stairs then joins me at the doors, looking as perfect as ever in a tailored navy suit.

"Ready to go?" He asks while I open the door.

"Y-Yeah."

Soran smirks at my stutter. He walks away without a word.

The carriage driver opens the door for us. I'm a little taken aback since that's normally my job. Soran steps in first, leaving me wondering where I'm meant to sit. Across from him? Beside him?

"Wallie," he calls my name like a soft lullaby. I shiver.

"Ah, sorry," I apologize, swiftly hopping in and saying, screw it, as I take a seat next to him. Soran stares, which has me squirming in place.

"S-Should I sit over there?" I'm about to get up and do so until Soran takes my hand.

I freeze in place, staring at the connection between us when Soran answers, "No. Stay here."

A soft touch to my chin has me looking up, meeting Soran's gaze. He's close, almost hesitant in leaning forward. My eyes flutter closed in anticipation, or maybe to hide my obvious embarrassment. I've yet to cool down; the kiss doesn't help, only amplifies it. When Soran's lips meet mine, I lean into him, relishing in the quiet touch. His hand gently holds me and his lips move slow.

The carriage lurches forward. We fall apart, but only for a brief moment. Another kiss, less hesitant than the first. The warm spring air grows humid. My fingers twist into the soft fabric of his jacket. Soran's hand combs through my hair. Our kiss deepens until I'm short of breath, panting against his lips when he pulls away for a breath. This time there's no hesitancy though, only yearning for more. Soran's hand slips around my waist, holding me close while I cling to his jacket.

Afterwards, we're both blushing. I like it, and I like how Soran takes my hand again. He's leaning back now, peering out the window silently. Not that I'm any better, I'm looking over the interior as if I expect to see something new. The silence isn't awkward, instead, it's comforting.

When we pull up to the restaurant, that comfort evaporates.

"I can't go in there," I whisper, peering up at an immaculate light gray brick building. The windows are held in place by twisted iron frames of ivory leaves. Spiral marble columns hold up an arched black awning. The double doors are monstrosities in their own right, narrow and tall with stained glass windows and a ruby carpet leading inside. This is a place for Soran, not me.

"Why not?" he asks.

"Look at it."

Soran looks. The door opens. He turns back to me and says, "I don't see why you can't go in."

"It's too fancy." I pick at my pants as if to prove my point.

"There are private rooms. You need not concern yourself with table manners."

"Are you trying to say I have bad table manners?"

"They could use some work."

My jaw drops. I'm about to give him a good lecture except he's already gone holding out his hand for me. That only brings about another blush that tickles my cheeks. I'm almost tempted not to take his hand, but damn me for being a hopeless romantic because I think it's super sweet and why the hell would I pass up this opportunity?

Regardless of how embarrassed it makes me, I take Soran's hand. To say we're being stared at is an understatement. The doormen lock eyes with me, both so wide-eyed I fear they may roll out of their sockets. But the doors are opened without hesitation to reveal a restaurant fitting of the exterior.

The first floor could rival the king's own castle. The walls are elevated with intricate black iron moldings around blinding silver crystal chandeliers. Couples in fine garbs sit at elegantly crafted tables with ruby table cloths and simple candlelight centerpieces. Servers walk tall with trays of wine and snacks, waiting to attend any at a moment's notice. Right now though, no one is being attended to seeing as Soran always garners the attention of everyone, but I think it's worse now.

We're still holding hands. Everyone is staring. My heart's racing.

Being next to Soran, I suddenly feel so small. He fits in, a man of elegance and grace, of power and beauty that surpasses most (my biased opinion says all, but I digress.) Then there's me, the butler in a typical uniform that can

barely read and has never amounted to anything. Of course, that's not what others see. All they see is Soran holding hands with a mortal and that mortal must be crazy or brainwashed, which pisses me off, but also terrifies me.

"Is t-this alright?" I whisper, glancing to our hands to inform him of what I'm referring to.

"Are you uncomfortable?"

"Just--" I look about the room. "Everyone is staring."

Soran says nothing, but that's only because his gaze says enough; with me, you'll have to get used to it.

"Nevermind, I'm fine," I quickly say, holding a little tighter.

Luckily, we follow a server up a spiral staircase to the second floor. At the end of the hall, a heavy black door is opened to reveal the private room. It's not much different than downstairs, only there's an extra sitting area with a couch and a coffee table filled with sweets. After we take our seats and the server leaves to retrieve our drinks, there's silence.

I'm hiding behind the menu that I still cannot read. Why the hell do they write in cursive? I can understand print, but cursive continues to elude me. Is that meant to be a S or a G?

Giving up, I sit the menu aside, pouting until Soran looks over. Seems he caught the look though because he asks, "Having trouble?"

"Don't tease me for not being able to read cursive."

"I would never."

"I can feel you thinking it."

"Oh? What am I thinking then?"

"That I'm stupid."

"I never once thought that."

I'm a bit taken aback. That wasn't teasing; it was honest. I'm starting to wonder if he's flattering me on purpose, maybe even earlier was an accident. He could be secretly smooth, who knows!

"Not even when I admitted that I couldn't read?" I ask as if I expect his answer to change.

He shakes his head, seeming to decide on what we're going to eat seeing as he sits the menu aside.

"I admit to being annoyed. Higra is usually very thorough so I expected to have been informed, however, I am aware not everyone can afford to learn. Besides, there are a great deal of things you know that I do not."

"Like what?"

"I have no idea how to work on a farm tending to fields or animals."

"Yeah, but you know how to run giant corporations."

"Are they more important than farmers?" he asks. "Do farmers not feed the kingdom?"

All this flattery is going to make my heart kick the bucket. His gaze isn't helping either, the warm red of his eyes grow more intoxicating by the day, like the red of dawn, brilliant and warm. Good thing we're sitting because my legs feel like jello.

"You're being abnormally nice today. Did something happen? Are you about to tell me I'm fired or kick me out of the house?" I ask.

"My apologies. I'll make sure to be cruel to you from now on."

"I'm teasing." I lightly tap his leg beneath the table with my foot. "I like it, you being nice."

I'm a little shocked that he returns the gesture. Then the doors open. Our server walks in, pouring us both a drink before taking our orders. When he's gone, silence replaces him so I try to use drinking as an excuse to not talk or come up with something to say. I wonder if Soran is doing the same.

Peering over the glass, I catch him drinking too. When he sits the glass down, he taps the base with a single finger, much like he was doing earlier on his desk. He's staring at the window as if it'll come up with something to say. I end up laughing at our odd but should have definitely seen it coming predicament.

"What's so funny?" he asks, watching me lean forward to shield my face in my hands.

"This is funny."

"This?"

"Us not knowing what to say all of a sudden, being nervous." I chance peeking through my fingers. "It's kinda nice, in an awful sort of way."

"Suppose so."

"In Chandri there weren't any places like this," I say, finally dropping my hands to the table. I play with the ruby tablecloth, feeling the fabric or pinching it between my fingers while thinking of earlier. "A date there was a walk, a drink at the local tavern or swimming in the river. I guess being here makes me uncertain of what to do--ah, but I'm not saying that I don't like it! This is nice too, just different."

"We could do all that," he says, catching me by surprise. "Go for a walk, swim in the lake, a tavern is likely off the table, but we could have a date at home."

"So you're admitting that this is a date?"

"What else would it be?"

"An employer showing his gratitude to his incredibly hardworking employee."

Soran rolls his eyes. "You're as annoying as ever this evening."

"Like I said, an incredibly hardworking...boyfriend."

Soran actually chokes on his drink. I laugh then laugh some more when I catch the faintest dusting of pink under his eyes. He's showing all kinds of great reactions today. I'm starting to feel spoiled.

He clears his throat. "You're always full of surprises."

"Thanks!"

I give a triumphant grin, one that is soon covered up by Soran leaning over the table. He catches my smile with a kiss, running his fingers through my hair. The taste of red wine lingers, but it's certainly not what is making me feel light headed. Then he pulls away, leaving me breathless.

"W-What was that for?" I ask.

"No reason. I just wanted to."

I really like him.

I really like Soran a lot.

✝✝✝

Early update, hi...mostly cause I thought today was Wednesday and posted on Tapas only to realize it's Tuesday. Oops xD But yes, Wallie, we know you like Soran a lot :) And he likes you~ With all the drama lately, we need more fluffy so you're welcome lol Got a few story suggestions for you if you're interest! First one is, if you want a story that'll make you smile and laugh, check out my friend Lena's story, The God of Love is a Deadbeat. You can read it on Tapas or Wattpad :) I left an external link for Tapas so check it out!

Second is, I HAVE A NEW STORY! That's right, check out Fools in Love if you want a college romantic comedy. It is going to be ridiculous, if you can't already tell by the cover lol check it out!

✝Sixty-Seven✝

Work is (somehow) even more awkward after the dinner date with Soran last night. If anyone was second guessing our relationship, they definitely aren't anymore. The only one really talking to me or treating me semi-normal is Hael and even he seems to mull over every word he says like he's speaking with the king himself. I'd be moping about it if there wasn't something else to mope about as I learn mere moments before lunch;

"The prince is coming?"

Soran nods from behind his desk. I'm shocked the letter hasn't burst into flames from his heated glare.

"Apparently, His Majesty has instructed his son to give their condolences for your capture and discuss what should be done with the clear violation of our treaty with Emperor Pihre. The Baylor's will not sit idly by after their *precious* citizen was attacked." Soran's scowl states that he smells all of the bullshit. "He will be here for dinner. It would be best if you kept to your room."

My jaw drops. "My room? What am I, a child getting grounded?"

"I certainly don't mean to treat you as such, but I don't want him anywhere near you."

After what I've learned, I understand why. Soran's hatred towards them, his reactions around them, the pieces of the puzzle now fit together. The picture that remains is more gruesome than I could have imagined. Soran is practically reminding me of the past with his gaze. Although he doesn't beg, he sure as hell looks like he is.

"I don't want you alone with Cathen either," I mumble when scuffing my feet against the rug. "And do you honestly think he won't find a way to drag me here to meet him?"

Soran averts his gaze, focusing his annoyance on a stack of papers. Again, how have they not caught fire? I feel the heat from here.

"We both know he's probably coming to be a nosy asshole," I add, stepping around the desk to be at his side. He won't look at me until I take his hand, which is as tense I expected it to be.

"The Baylor's know about us. I don't want to run and hide from them. If you act like prey then they will treat you like prey," I say to him, frowning when he sighs. His dark bangs are ruffled from the sudden breath of air. "Do you think he will try anything with you right in front of him? Isn't the safest place right beside you?"

"I don't think there is any safest place," Soran answers honestly because he really does know best. "However, if the Baylor's were up to something, I doubt they'd alert me about it. If anything, Cathen is probably coming to check my condition."

I raise a brow at that, one that Soran notices. He rolls his eyes when spitting out, "Assassins continue to come for me even now after all the failed attempts. It's because they're always trying something new, a new poison, a new spell. If they visit and find me weak then that's proof that Leschandeal is on to something."

"If you can figure that out so easily, wouldn't they suspect you to hide the truth if you were hurt so why bother coming at all?" I ask.

"If I deny the visitation then it's proof it worked. If he visits and I show signs of weakness that's also proof. Since I am obviously fine, it's best to take them up on their offer to remind them that I will always be a thorn in their side."

"You sound pleased with that."

"Because I am." Soran finally grins. "At least I can get back at them by being an immortal annoyance."

I laugh at that. Soran's grin falls though. Each day I'm understanding more and more why he's on edge all the time, why he once smiled so little. That's changing now, but even when we're together, the stress of it all lingers; a constant stain in the back of his mind.

"I suppose I could take the time to call forth Malatis before they arrive so they know I'm in no mood for games," he says when standing.

"Are you ever in the mood for games?"

Soran suddenly pulls me in for what I expect to be a kiss, but he doesn't close the gap. He only smiles when saying, "You'd be surprised."

Then he lets go, walking around the desk like he didn't just paint me red with a few words.

"Pervert," I whisper under my breath, smirking at Soran's retreating back.

"I can hear you."

"I know, that's why I said it."

Soran lingers at the door, watching me join him.

"I won't be hiding, right? When Cathen arrives, we'll face him together?" I ask, making sure that we're on the same page.

"Are you sure you want to? He, and those like him, will bother us many times in the future. You can wait to face this another day."

I shake my head. "Might as well get used to it now."

Soran bows his head for some reason. He grips the door handle, twisting it back and forth for a moment before saying, "I'm sorry it is something you have to get used to."

"I don't think it's so bad."

I get a very confused scowl for that.

"If the prince is coming, I imagine we're going to have some amazing food," I explain, grinning from ear to ear at the thought of what the cooks will make. Soran pinches the bridge of his nose and I don't know if it's from shock or annoyance.

"Wallace."

"Oh, you haven't called me Wallace the last few days. Have I angered you, Your Grace?"

"Wallace."

"That was funny and you know it."

"This isn't something to laugh about," he says, and yet his lips are definitely twitching with the urge to smile.

"Sometimes the moments we aren't supposed to laugh at are the best moments to laugh at. Life is a lot easier when you can get a smile even out of the bad."

Soran gives me a swift once over. "Who are you?"

"Excuse you?"

"Wallie could never come up with that kind of bullshit on the spot."

I place an elegant hand over my aching heart. "I am offended."

Soran opens the door, stepping out into the hall when saying, "Speak little with him. Cathen plays games and he will try to get answers from you so don't allow him to get any. And since we don't have time to go out, wear the suit I bought you before. I'll send someone for you when you need to start getting ready."

"Hey--" I bite my lip, spotting Janein down the hall. She walks into a room though, not catching me calling Soran so casually. He stops and peers back at me.

"Do you have a blue suit?" I whisper, causing him to tilt his head curiously. He actually blushes when I say, "We could wear matching suits. I bet that'd be super awkward for Cathen."

"Wallace."

"Or it'd really piss him off."

The fact that Soran is blushing has made my day. No, it has made my damn year. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing. Either way, I have succeeded in making a vampire blush so it's an accomplishment. One that Soran won't let me bask in because he says nothing, only walks away.

"Is that a yes or a no to the blue suit?!"

He doesn't even respond, only disappears downstairs while I snicker.

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The suit Soran got me was cleaned after the Day of Aberia. The pristine white undershirt shows no signs of Cathen's trickery. I kept it hung in the wardrobe, expecting to never wear it again yet here I am, standing in one of the guest bedrooms getting ready. Elamir is assisting, which makes this all the more awkward. Thankfully, she's only helping me with my hair but she's giving a courteous smile and not saying much more than small talk.

I guess things have changed. I don't know if they'll ever go back.

"Finished," says Elamir, gesturing to the mirror. She has combed back my hair, gelling down the sides so it isn't as chaotic. With this suit on, and the pocket watch Soran also bought me dangling from my chest, I almost look a part of his world. I can barely recognize the man staring back at me. He looks noble, reared from birth to charm, taught to read and write and eat without scraping his fork against porcelain plates, but I sure as hell don't feel like that man.

"Do you not like it?" asks Elamir.

"No, no, it looks great! I'm...just not used to it."
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Elamir smiles and nods. Just then, the door opens and she squeaks in fear, stumbling away as I spin around expecting to see something horrifying, but I'm met with a pair of big green eyes instead.

"Malatis!" I throw my arms around the giant cat like we're old pals. And like a cat, he doesn't seem to care much, sitting at my side with his head held high then bringing up his paw to lick until I grab his face. His eyes are wide when I push his head this way and that, inspecting for injuries.

"You may leave, Elamir," says Soran when entering. Ah, there is no blue suit. We're not there yet, ok, ok. We'll do it another time then!

Elamir is more than happy to oblige. She scoots around Malatis, never taking her eyes off him until she bursts out the door, which closes behind her. I suppose she has never seen him before either? I wonder how many have.

"Is he really alright?" I ask, pouting when Malatis turns away. He rubs up against Soran, purring and, I swear, smirking. Is he teasing me? Rubbing it in that he likes Soran more? While that makes perfect sense, he is Soran's familiar, I somehow feel insulted!

"His injuries healed in The Veil and, as you can see--" Soran scratches behind Malatis' ear and, like a dog, his foot starts smacking the floor. "He is more than ok."

"And he's back for good?"

"That does seem to be best, even with Janika around."

"She's still here?" I haven't seen her so I thought she may have left after retrieving us.

"She keeps watch. It's best others aren't aware of her presence, especially Cathen. Let them think there is only Malatis."

I nod in agreement, pursing my lips at Malatis when he nudges Soran's hand for more attention but won't even come to me when I hold out my hand to

give that attention. How rude! I would give you all the love if you let me! Let me pet you, damn it!

"Speaking of Cathen, he will be here soon. Unfortunately, we should greet him at the entryway." Soran holds out his arm for me. My eyes widen. I peer about the room. Soran nods when I meet his gaze, silently telling me that, yes, he wants me to take his arm. I'm warm when finally doing so, following him out of the room with Malatis strutting along ahead of us.

"Is it alright to greet him like this?" I whisper, flushing at our close proximity.

Holding hands is bad enough, but being attached at the arm? We're right up against each other so that when Soran faces me, he's so close that I can count the shades of red in his eyes. I don't think that's a complaint. I like it, how warm he is, how close we are. My heart races like it's searching for first place, in what? Haven't a clue, but I'm fairly certain it is actually winning.

"I thought our plan was to make him uncomfortable?" He asks.

"It is."

"Although, knowing Cathen, he will likely tease us instead."

"What's to tease?" I smile through the blush that is borderline a sunburn at this point. "If he says anything, it's only a sign that he's jealous because he's alone and miserable."

"He's engaged."

"Happily?"

"Would anyone be happily engaged to Cathen?"

I snort out a laugh, one that disappears when we make it to the doors. There's commotion outside. Cathen is definitely here. Although I talked big, I'm feeling the nerves now. Soran knows it too seeing as he's attached to me. He gives me a slow nod.

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Aw, Soran and Wallie are adorable, aren't they? :D But hmm, what could Cathen be doing? Is he really there just to check in? But that is not what's most important! Nope, MALATIS IS MOST IMPORTANT! He's the most precious <3

P.S. If you haven't checked out my new story, Fools in Love, then you totally should! It only updates once a week so easy to keep up with, but also more of a ridiculous comedy so it's a nice break!
P.S.S. I made an Instagram for what I've been reading lately! If you're at all interested or want to leave recommendations, check it out :) my username is twoonyreads

✝Sixty-Eight✝

The doors swing open. Cathen steps into the estate with his guards, a dramatic entrance for the dramatic prince. His clothes are pristine white, gold and red, tailored perfectly to his muscular form. The crooked smile on his face doesn't even falter when he spots us at the top of the stairs. He does, however, linger on me for a moment as if double checking that his sight is working properly then faces Soran.

"Your Highness," Soran says with a bow of his head that I mimic. I can't exactly bow when Soran's arm is still around mine. I consider if he did it on purpose, as an excuse not to properly bow. Somehow, he always finds ways to piss off the royals. It's all in the details!

"Lord Makai, Wallie." Cathen nods in our direction. "It's good to see that you're both alright. When we received word of the attack, it was honestly shocking. We sent guards as soon as we could. Luckily there were no casualties on your end."

"Lucky indeed."

Soran descends the stairs with me at his side. Malatis follows, our shadow with a piercing green gaze, or perhaps mine. It is only now that I notice he is standing far closer to me. Even at the bottom of the stairs, he sits beside me, his tail thumping against the stairs as if he's annoyed.

"We're honored to have you visit," Soran says, although we all know it's a lie. "This way. Dinner has been prepared."

"You are most kind."

Cathen follows us. I do my best not to meet his gaze, but when I end up doing so, he smirks. Not friendly or teasing, something more sinister that makes my heart race in a far less pleasant manner.

In the dining area, the table is set. I've only ever helped set it up, never sat at it. The cushions are as soft as my bed. The silverware is sparkling silver. While Cathen sits at one end of the table, Soran sits at the other and I am on his right. Again, Malatis perches himself next to me, never taking his gaze off the smirking prince.

Food and wine is brought out on golden platters that we haven't used since Lord Movell and Lady Connte's visit. I never thought I'd be on the receiving end, trying not to make eye contact with my co-workers that are now serving me. Once they're gone though, the real problem rears its ugly head in a mess of golden hair.

"Emperor Pihre and his men must have been very confident to have broken the treaty by crossing into our borders and attacking our citizens no less, but I see that whatever plans they had were for naught."

"Obviously." Soran eats elegantly, like he isn't speaking with his mortal enemy. I'm nibbling at my food, suddenly very aware of my lack of table manners. "They were cocky and they paid the price, I assure you."

"I have no doubt, after all, the hideout in which Wallie was held captive has been burned to ash. Nothing remains, but this is the best for all of us. We were unaware that the Pihre's had a hideout inside our borders. Thanks to you we've been rid of it. My father wishes to give his gratitude for that."

I didn't know about that, but it isn't surprising. Soran destroyed the evidence so the Baylor's can't get their hands on whatever odd ritual they tried. Although it did fail, Soran was severely injured so best not let the Baylor's know a thing.

"My father is already speaking with Emperor Pihre about his transgressions. Don't worry, Wallie, we'll make sure this doesn't happen again," says Cathen.

I'm shocked to have been acknowledged. When Cathen looks at me though, Soran hisses, "It shouldn't have happened to begin with. Perhaps the guards need a good scolding considering they can't protect their own citizens."

"How were we to know a group of mages would be sent to capture your lover?"

I choke on my drink, barely managing to wipe the wine from my mouth before it stains my suit. I swear Malatis snickers. I glare over my shoulder at the cat that looks away before meeting my gaze. He totally snickered!

"I didn't know you would be so shy, Wallie, especially after parading yourself so obviously like this," says Cathen, earning a sharp glare from Soran and myself.

"There's no use hiding when you already know the truth. You were suspicious long before now," I reply.

"You made it so painfully obvious. I'm glad for you though. Lord Makai has always been like a bitter old man. Perhaps you can teach him how to relax a little."

Soran rolls his eyes. "I do hope you did not come here to comment on my love life."

"A bit difficult not to considering that is what led to Wallie's capture in the first place."

I want to stab him with a fork. Soran must see this because he touches my thigh beneath the table. I stab a piece of my dinner instead, which is fucking delicious, by the way.

"Either way, we need to discuss what you would like done about this, Lord Makai," says Cathen, thankfully moving on. "Since no one was killed among the estate and you are both unharmed, one could forgive this and stop a war."

"I have no intention to be the cause of a war. I request that Emperor Pihre be warned. Should he threaten myself, or anyone among my estate again, he will find himself in an early grave of his own making," Soran growls.

"I will make sure to pass on the message."

I'm tempted to remark how this all could have been sent in a letter, but we both know that isn't the real reason for Cathen's visit. He is here to inspect Soran and he has, seeing that he is perfectly fine, so am I. There's even Malatis, proof that Soran is stronger than before, or at least willing to show it now.

"The Pihre's have always been a pain, sticking their nose into our business," he adds as if he and his family aren't a pain either. I look at Soran like I've lost my soul from a single sentence. Although he says nothing, I can see the desire for him to roll his eyes. We both know Cathen only said that to piss us off.

"Indeed. Leschandeal has always been hell bent on banishing vilis from this world, unlike many others," Soran responds. His soft jab isn't so soft though. Cathen actually rolls his eyes. "Of course they are fools. There is always both and always will be."

"Lord Movell is most intrigued about what they attempted. I do hope you would give him a briefing."

"I will consider it."

That is Soran's way of saying; no way in hell.

So we spend more time with Cathen over dinner. He speaks to Soran like they've been friends their whole lives. He cracks jokes and tells stories with a friendly smile that would charm anyone that didn't know any better. Hell, even then, he's still charming. There are times I want to laugh or smile at something he says and that's almost more terrifying than his occasional cold stare directed at me.

I wonder how much this bothers him, seeing me, like an open nerve that he's begging to irritate but can't. Not with Soran beside me, not with Malatis at my feet. I'm right before his eyes, but he, the prince, can't do a damn thing. I suppose I can understand a bit, how frustrating Soran is to them. He is meant to be "beneath" them, but no matter what they do, Soran will always hold more power than they could ever dream of. That annoyance is what led to the torture of an innocent child and the death of Soran's family.

Thinking about that, about what Cathen said to me once about Soran's "room," infuriates me. My clenched hands tremble. I hide them under the table until Cathen finally leaves that evening, thankfully, not causing a scene or any trouble.

"I thank you for your hospitality," he says with a beaming smile at the door. "And again, we are glad that no harm has befallen either of you."

"And we thank you for the visit," Soran bites.

"I hope to see each other again soon. Especially you, Wallie."

Soran angles himself so that he's shielding me from Cathen's view.

"It's getting late, Your Highness. You should go while there's still light."

"Of course." Cathen walks away after Soran bows.

Once he's in the carriage and pulling onto the road, the door is shut and Soran grabs me by the hand to go upstairs. We're in his room in no time. Malatis actually waits outside at the door, which closes behind us.

"Are you alright?" Soran asks once we're alone, facing me with his arms crossed.

"I'm incredibly annoyed," I answer honestly, smiling at his immediate chuckle. "After what you told me, it made me want to punch him even more."

"Is that all?"

"What else would there be?"

"You aren't worried about how this may make him pay even more attention to you?"

I shrug at the thought. "His attention has already been on me. I'm fine, Soran, really." I reach for his hands, holding them gently in my own. "Are you ok with it?"

"I hate that he even looks at you."

"Is that jealousy I hear?"

Soran rolls his eyes at my teasing tone. I understand his feelings completely. Wrapping my arms around him, I lean into Soran as he easily holds me.

"I know it bothers you, but at least he's out of our hair for now. You've shown them that you're ok and they can crawl back into whatever hell hole they came from for a little while."

Soran hums until I look up at him and say, "Next time though, let's wear matching suits."

"Sometimes I really don't know what to do with you."

✝✝✝

Sorry for the late update. My internet has been off for almost three days. It magically came back on today? Don't know how because a repairman wasn't meant to come until Tuesday but, whatever, I'm not complaining! Anyways, Cathen was only an annoyance so that's better than a deadly annoyance, yeah? xD

✝Sixty-Nine✝

Malatis really is a cat. The moment I make the bed and move on to cleaning the windows, he's on the mattress.

"Malatis!" I hiss, hands on my hips, which is not a threatening stance when standing against a magical creature that has deemed himself tired and in need of a nap. He rests on the bed, the sheets now wrinkled under him.

"Get off the bed, I just made it!"

He does no such thing.

"There's a perfectly comfortable couch across the hall."

He yawns and settles his head atop his paws.

"Once I'm done with this room you're going to have to move so I can re-make that bed."

As if to taunt me, he rolls onto his back, pulling the sheets from beneath the mattress and getting his dark fur all over the place. I guess I will be doing the laundry again too.

"You really are a demon," I growl and, I swear on my life, he smirks at me. He's definitely smirking! But Soran doesn't believe me no matter how much I tell him. Whatever, he just can't believe his precious Malatis is secretly evil since he's all rub-a-dub-dub when Soran is around. Purring, rubbing against his leg, wanting to play with scrunched up pieces of paper while laying at Soran's feet.

Maybe that's why he's being a little jerk. Soran has made Malatis follow me around for the last four days. The first day resulted in many co-workers avoiding me like the plague. When I entered the kitchen or the lounge, they scattered like roaches. Malatis never seemed to mind until he learned that, if people were around, there were more crumbs on the floor for him to lap up.

And maybe I've been trying to win him over by giving him food but, as of now, it's yet to really work.

Whatever, I'll win his love eventually.

Work at the mansion has finally calmed down after a little more than a week of work. Construction is still ongoing, but almost all broken furniture and ripped rugs or curtains have been replaced. The estate is looking gorgeous as usual, a few new carved moldings and staircases thrown in. The carpenters work with slow precision, leaving dusts of wood or stone that we're all more than happy to clean up considering how gorgeous the finished pieces are.

My co-workers, however, have not calmed down. Since Malatis' appearance, the avoiding has gotten worse. Hael hasn't made a verbal complaint to me, but I know he dislikes Malatis guarding outside the door. Not sure if that was Soran's order or Malatis feels better being out in the hall. Personally, I'd like it if he slept on the bed or by me so I could pet him in his sleep, maybe win him over that way. See, I'm working really hard at this!

Anyways, Malatis is further proof that I am no longer "just an employee." The quiet stares and obvious avoidance from my co-worker's say, "this is His Grace's lover so keep your distance." There's no denying the sting that comes along with this new form of loneliness. Perhaps I was too naive to not consider this more seriously. I thought maybe we could all continue joking around and working as usual, but that isn't the case. Higra gives me work, mostly to do on my own, since we both know if I'm with another they'll try to do the work for me. Earn some brownie points or out of fear that I may say something to Soran.

In a way, I'm agitated; agitated that they'd see me as that. In another, I completely understand. I've even heard tales of workers among the estates that one wrong move could lose them their job, or their life. They rather be safe than sorry.

"Why don't you make yourself useful and carry the sheets?" I request, watching Malatis slip off the mattress when I tug on the sheets. I hold them

out to him, wondering if he'll take them in his jaws.

He turns and walks away, nose up in the air.

"I'm not giving you any treats for dinner!"

His tail swishes through the air as if to say, *"sure, sure."* I almost hate that I understand his unspoken language.

I'm taking the laundry downstairs when I happen to overhear Hael and Janein speaking in another room.

"That new bakery in South End opened today!" Janein announces gleefully. "Elamir and Enith said they're coming, you should join too."

"I can go," Hael responds. "Would do us all some good to take a break."

"O-Oh, hi, Wallie," Janein sputters when spotting me through the doorway. I didn't even realize I stopped walking until she spoke to me with a crooked smile.

Hael glances back too and there's this glimmer of hope when I ask, "A new bakery opened?"

The glimmer is already fading when Janein bites her lip.

"When are you all going? I--" I to Malatis, who is currently standing on his hindlegs to sniff a flower in a vase. Then he pulls it out to do who knows what with it. "Uh, I might have to bring Malatis, but I'd like to tag along."

Which I already know is a stupid thing to say. Even with Malatis at my side, heading into town without Soran is unlikely, but I try as if I think that'll change reality.

Janein is taken aback. She nearly drops the lamp she was cleaning, barely saving it by gripping the lamp to her chest. Her gaze shifts between me and Hael, desperately searching on how to reply.

Luckily for her, and unluckily for me, Hael finally answers, "I don't think that's a good idea, Wallie."

The truth feels like a smack to the face.

"Even if Malatis came, being outside of the estate with you could put the rest of us in danger," he says softly, forehead wrinkled from a scowl. "Sorry."

"N-No, I get it, y-you're right. It was silly to ask."

"Maybe His Grace could take you some time?" Janein suggests, a poor attempt to salvage the situation but an attempt I'm grateful for nonetheless.

"Yeah." I laugh, headed lowered in shame. "I can ask. Uh, I should...take this downstairs." I hold up my full arms as if they can't already see the sheets, then I'm gone.

I hear Janein hiss at Hael after I walk away, "That was too blunt!"

I'm already rushing down the stairs to the laundry room before I can hear the rest. The sheets are thrown into a hamper to be done with others later in the afternoon. When I turn around, Malatis is sitting there, peering up at me with wide green eyes. He lets me reach out to pat his head and when I kneel, he only watches me.

"Have you been to a bakery before?" I ask as if I expect him to answer. He only blinks at me. "I wonder if you'd even like baked goods, like bread and cookies."

Another blink.

"Soran will probably take me if I ask. I guess, from now on, I'll always have to ask." My voice breaks around the end. I wipe the stray tear from my eye, feeling childish for getting worked up over nothing.

Then Malatis leans in. His purr is a loud rumble when he rests his head on my shoulder. He doesn't pull away when I wrap my arms around him. I suppose I've won him over just a little, or maybe he's being nice only for

today. Either way, I'm grateful that his purr covers the sounds of my sniffles and his soft fur is nice to hide my shame in.

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At the end of the day, I always meet Soran in his study. I brought dinner with me this time since it's ready. In the office, Soran sits over paperwork. He gestures for me to come in, but I know to wait. Sitting the food on the coffee table, I wait on the couch for him to finish.

Malatis is already at his feet, laying there waiting for acknowledgement and attention. I suppose I'll never win over Soran, but I don't think it's fair to compare us. Who knows how old Malatis is and how long he has been Soran's familiar. I'll always be one step behind but, whatever, he let me hug him today, that's what matters!

Soran either finishes or decides he is done for the day when getting up. As usual, he pets Malatis then joins me. Although he shows a smile, there's annoyance in his gaze from whatever the hell he was looking at.

"Something wrong?" I ask when picking up my plate to start eating. Soran doesn't even glance at his.

"We'll likely be taking a trip soon," he answers with a tired sigh. Everyday I think I see a new side of him and today it's "lazy Soran." Rather than sitting punctually as he normally always is, he actually slouches in place, legs spread out under the coffee table and arms crossed like a pouting teen. I'd laugh if I wasn't positively thrilled to know that he's this comfortable around me.

"We?" I hum.

He nods.

"Where to? What for?"

"Isabe again. There was a collapse in one of the mining tunnels."

"Was anyone killed?"
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"Two dead and at least ten injured."

That may explain why Soran isn't hungry. Before I can ask more, he explains, "The mine was just inspected. I'm concerned something was missed due to negligence. It's better to inspect the incident myself and see why something happened that shouldn't have."

I nod in agreement, giving Soran a reassuring smile when he looks at me. The tension in his shoulders ease up. Then Malatis sits his head in Soran's lap. He's purring before Soran even pets him.

"When will we be leaving?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Another train ride?" I light up at the thought, which has Soran snickering.

"Yes, another train ride."

"Hopefully no secretive assassin this time."

"They would have more trouble if they tried," he answers with a smirk that confuses me. I'm not sure, but there's something about the way he's smiling that makes me question it. Not sure if it's good or bad...or both.

With an accusing stare, I ask, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Who knows."

"Soran."

"Wallace."

I scratch my head in thought then taunt, "Because you care about me *soooo* much that you're going to creepily watch me the entire time?"

Soran rolls his eyes. "Try again."

"You're going to literally tie us together."

"How did the assassin nearly get to you?" he asks, trying to throw me some crumbs here, which I happily take.

"By sneaking into my room."

"And how did we solve that problem?"

"By sharing--"

Soran smiles. I light up again, but in a much different way.

"Oh," I whisper, or perhaps choke that out seeing as my heart has jumped into my throat. I'm fairly certain it remains there too. "W-We'll be...sharing a r-room?"

"There will be two beds, if they're needed."

If they're needed.

I have to look away.

While I mentally panic, Soran finally starts eating dinner. Apparently his annoyance from earlier is overshadowed by joy at having made me turn beet red. When I take a chance to peek at him, I find Soran watching with a taunting grin. Is he waiting for me to say something? Because I got nothing.

I'm not going to say I don't want to share a room because I definitely do...purely because it's safer. Definitely the only reason, not that I'm expecting anything, absolutely not. We're going on a business trip. Business being the key word. And obviously Soran is doing this to keep me safe, definitely...definitely not expecting anything...

"S-So, uh, why didn't you have Malatis out more often before?" I'm changing the subject real quick. Soran has to notice what I'm up to but, thankfully, he makes no mention of it.

"Seems l-like you two are close," I add. "I know you said you have to keep your strength up to keep him here, but it seems worth it to me."

"I used to have two familiars and both were with me," he answers. "My other, Denny, was like a small dog."

Oh...I think I know where this is going.

"There was an attack years back and I couldn't save him. Suppose I got paranoid after that so I've only been calling Malatis to check in whenever I can. He's safer in The Veil anyways, living free as he wishes."

"They can die then? Familiars. They don't just go back to The Veil?"

Soran nods. "They're difficult to kill based on the type. Denny was more of a scout than a fighter so he couldn't defend himself like Malatis can."

"Did you kill them?" I growl, earning a raised brow. "The bastards that killed Denny."

"I didn't, but Malatis avenged his friend well." Soran pats his head. Malatis understands enough, I'm sure, because he's grinning. He's definitely grinning so I pat him on the head too.

"He will be joining us to Isabe," Soran adds. "Janika will remain here, make sure there isn't an assault for whatever reason."

"How long will she be around?" I haven't seen her since she helped rescue me. Soran claims she is here, lingering in the woods and keeping out of sight. She's doing a damn good job of that too. No one suspects a thing, at least not that I've heard.

"Until Quelen gets fed up with me."

I snort at that then frown. The thought of the other vampires is a little disheartening. No, maybe concerning is a better word. Based on what Soran has said about them, the three aren't friendly. They're merely working together because they, surprisingly, believe in the same thing; the world doesn't need more vampires.

"Why didn't they ever help you?" I ask, realizing I should explain first. "Quelen and Karsissia, when you were younger, why didn't they help?"

"They will only aid if it helps them in the long run," he answers around a scowl. His eyes darken at the mention of them. "Quelen, well, he couldn't care less. He's interested in traveling, doing as he wishes wherever he pleases. Karsissia, she certainly knew what was happening and knew that it was nothing worth worrying over. What was used on me would probably never work on them, otherwise she wouldn't have let it happen. They certainly won't go out of their way to make sure I'm safe or unharmed. That's simply how they are; cruelty in physical form."

"They sound very unpleasant."

"Whatever you're imagining, multiply it by a hundred and you would still only have a sliver of an idea."

That certainly isn't a happy thought.

"I've already made preparations for our departure," says Soran when finishing up his dinner. I say finish up, but he didn't eat much, never really does. "Make sure you're packed for at least a week."

"Not like I have much to pack."

"Then make sure there's space in your luggage. We can grab a few things while we're there."

"I don't need anything," I mumble, refusing to admit that I like the idea of us going out. I don't care if it's to get a meal, to go shopping or only for work. This is a trip where it'll be the two of us, some time spent with *only* the two of us. I like that, but I also don't want to become too spoiled. I get the feeling I will be if I don't stop him.

"Apparently you do if you don't have enough to pack for a week long trip," he argues, smirking because he knows what I mean. He has to know that I don't want him spending a crazy amount of money on me but...isn't he already? He has gotten a train ticket for the both of us and a hotel room. He'll pay for my meals while there too. Damn it, we can't stack clothes on top of that!

"We don't have to go shopping," he adds, which I perk up at until his next words. "I can just have some stuff brought to the hotel so you can pick what you want, or simply buy all of it."

"W-Why must you make t-this difficult?" I sputter, feeling the heat rush up to my ears. "I don't need to be spoiled!"

Soran sips his tea like he can't hear me.

"If you keep this up, what if I start expecting it?!"

"That's fine. I have a lot of money."

"Soran!"

I throw my face in my hands from embarrassment. I say that yet I'm still excited at the thought, wondering what stores we'll go to and if Soran will hold my hand while we're out. What's going to happen while we're there? Is he expecting anything to happen? Will we grab a meal or two together and laugh over wine? So much that we could and may do, so much that I can't afford but I want to do it anyways.

Soran is seriously making me spoiled.

But maybe I need this, going out, seeing as I can't do that with anyone else. I can't afford to go to a small time bakery with my co-workers, it's dangerous. This is the future that's in front of me. Soran warned me of that and I wouldn't say it's a bad future, how could I? It's just different, but I'm more than ok with different.

✝✝✝

Sorry for not updating in a while. My internet has been off for 9 days -_- should be back to the regularly scheduled program now that everything is working again. Decided not to break up this chapter to make up for the missed updates. Anyways, poor Wallie, he's being excluded D= But he and Soran are going on a trip! A work trip, but still...it's a trip xD

✝Seventy✝

The day to leave for Isabe arrives. I wake early to attend to my usual duties while also making sure my belongings are packed for the trip. This is meant to be for business, but the jitters of excitement won't leave. Wondering what we'll do in our free time, hoping to enjoy certain aspects of the trip as a couple.

Wow.

Even thinking that sends me into shivers. We are a couple; feels surreal.

Ok, stop thinking about it! Stop, stop, stop!

Although Soran doesn't argue with me about attending to him as a butler for our departure, I have been informed that I don't have to wait on his hand and foot. We may have to discuss docking my pay or something, otherwise I feel like a jerk for not actually doing my job as I should. Anyways, our luggage is already waiting outside. Higra and Layne bow when Soran and I walk out the door.

The weather's nice, clear skies accompanying the warm weather of spring. There's finally some foliage among the trees. If the attack hadn't happened, the garden would be growing, alas, there are but a few peeks of grass and flowers through the fresh new dirt. Better than nothing I suppose, and perhaps a few flowers will be sprouting by the time we return. Malatis follows behind, actually choosing to hop up with the carriage driver rather than sharing with us.

"He likes to get off and walk around," Soran explains after we've settled in the carriage that smoothly moves forward.

"Suppose we will be on a train for a few hours. He should get out any energy he has now." I purse my lips with sudden realization. "Why does it sound like we're talking about a child?"

Soran shrugs, choosing not to confirm or deny that Malatis kind of is like a child. Moments later, the carriage veers off the old road into town. The curtains are drawn, shielding us from the outside world, which is a tad unfortunate. I haven't been to town in a while. Hearing the bustle of city life but only seeing shadows leaves me a little disappointed.

"I've brought a few books on lumen. We can read over some in the evenings, if you'd like," Soran suggests. I'm curious if he did so on purpose, perhaps catching on or assuming my thoughts. Either way, I'm grateful, rather not be in a solemn mood when we have some alone time together.

I do perk up at the mention of learning. First I couldn't begin because the doctor said no using magic for some time. Next it was because there was so much going on. While Soran is still obviously busy, he's at least getting me started.

"Really? I'd love that. I grabbed a book from the library before but didn't get far. Well, I might have done more if all--" I wave my hands around. "This didn't happen."

Soran nods.

"Did...did Kailyn teach you magic then?" I ask, worrying over my bottom lip. Now that his past has been shared, I'm uncertain if the topic of family is an acceptable conversation, or one that can be brought up even briefly. Although it happened so long ago, the scars remain as vivid as if they happened yesterday.

When Soran nods, I ease up. There's no obvious sign that he dislikes the topic since he does answer rather calmly, "Some I learned through observing as a child, admittedly they were not spells that a child should have known."

My throat tightens with nerves. He likely speaks of his years in the Baylor's dungeons. I rather not ask for the specifics of that, especially when I saw a glimpse of what transpired.

"Others Kailyn did teach me once I opened up a bit. He eventually hired a tutor that came every day to give me a proper education," Soran further explains.

Royals often school their own children with private tutors or send them off to high scale academies. Soran being schooled at home is no surprise, although that saddens me. The idea of him not making friends his own age is upsetting. I may not have had a lot of time at school, but it certainly helped me connect with people I may not have otherwise.

"You actually went?" I end up asking around a smirk. The thought of little teen Soran begrudgingly sitting over school work is rather amusing. "I think you were the rebellious type. I bet you skipped all the time."

That earns a wide-eyed expression of absolutely faked offense. He continues to play though, crossing his arms stubbornly when arguing against my accusation, "I was a good student."

"Were you though?"

We keep a long eye lock that inevitably ends with Soran's heavy sigh and the truth, "I might have skipped a few times."

"Uh huh."

"It was boring."

"Knew it."

My cheeks warm up when Soran suddenly takes my hand. Using the hold, he reels me in, until our thighs brush. Our enclasped hands are locked between our chests, the heat of the carriage growing exponentially in a matter of seconds.

"You seem to know me so well, Wallie," he speaks with a devilish smirk. Every word reverberates in my ears.

My eyes can't seem to decide where they wish to focus; the red of his eyes or the red of his lips. "Uh...well...it was just a hunch."

"Hm."

His gaze is taunting, a warm red that likely mirrors the shade of my cheeks. Soran closes the gap, pressing his lips to mine in a comforting kiss. He rests his hand beneath my chin, holding me in place, not that I had any plans to pull away, in fact, I'm leaning into him. A quiet moan escapes me when he deepens the kiss. The gentle caress of his thumb on the back of my hand accompanied with the soft exploration of his tongue behind my lips sends a shudder down my spine. The kiss lasts until my lungs ache for air.

When we break apart, he continues to speak as if he didn't just spend five minutes making out with me; "What about you then? Did Chandri not have a local school even for children?"

Huh? I blink rapidly, completely forgetting what we were just talking about. His thumb rubs the back of my hand, although his smirk is only teasing. Slowly, I remember and then get a little annoyed that his expression states he is well aware that my mind is hazy because of the kiss. I quickly clear my throat and look away.

"There was a school, but with there being only me and Mom, we couldn't afford not having me work the farm too. I stopped going around..." I frown at the memory. "Well, after Dad died."

Soran squeezes my hand, a silent act of comfort that I never realized would mean so much until it happened. Although he says nothing, the hand hold is somehow more than enough. His warmth spreads to me, tickling my arm up to my chest where it settles in my heart as a comforting embrace.

"Speaking of Chandri, I never asked, but why did you come?"

It's Soran's turn to be confused. He tilts his head in questioning.

"The village, why did you help? It's not like you're part of the military and I doubt the Baylor's would ask for your assistance."

The mention of the Baylor's always puts a frown on Soran's face, this time is no different. With a heavy sigh, he responds, "You're right, they didn't ask

for my help. Typically I don't get involved in their trivial wars, not only because I don't care, but having a vampire assist the military, well, that tends to do more harm than good."

"Why's that?"

"I only frighten the enemy more and a frightened enemy can be even more dangerous, more deadly. If they think I'm assisting the Baylor's then Aberia is a bigger threat than expected and more reason to wipe out an entire country of innocent civilians."

Ah, that does make sense. I admit, if Karsissia or Quelen were to back a nation, that would frighten me even more. Sure, that could lead to the other nations backing off, but if a time came when they could strike then they'd take it without question. They'd want to bring down the biggest enemy first and the biggest enemy is always a vampire.

"What made you change your mind then?"

"Not a what, a who," he answers, going quiet a moment as if combing through his memories. His eyes squint in thought. "He never gave a name, only came running up to the estate in a frantic mess. A civilian soldier that was seeking an audience with me. Higra was about to send him off, but I heard him from my office, desperately pleading for a single moment."

Soran suddenly looks away. He almost shyly glances at me when admitting, "I gave him an audience because I was curious what he had to say, assuming he'd attempt to guilt me into going, give a ridiculous reason because why else would he be there?"

"I understand that, but that isn't what happened is it?"

He shakes his head.

✝✝✝

ADVENTURE TIME! How will their time in Isabe go? ;D And oh boy, we're finally learning why Soran helped Chandri! Took long enough xD

✝Seventy-One✝

"He begged on his hands and knees," Soran explains. "Speaking of family members who had been taken hostage. Those that managed to evacuate hadn't heard from their loved ones in months. He knew that their division was being sent as a diversion, for Baylor's true warriors to attack another base farther south and eventually ride in when they least expected it. Not like the civilian soldiers meant much, so long as it won them the war, it didn't matter how many lives were lost."

A tactic that many rulers used in history long before the Baylor's. Hell, Soran's own father did on more than one occasion. He was a strategic mastermind. Most didn't mention the deaths because the war was won and even more lives were saved.

"I asked him why he came to me, did he expect a monster to slay the monster?" He continued and, for some reason, began to smile at the memory. "Do not tease as I admit I remember the speech word for word."

I nudge him as if to say that won't be a problem. If he remembered it then that only means it meant a lot.

"It's almost comical how he didn't hesitate to respond; a monster is not a beast of nightmares or a demon of darkness, but rather the cruelty that resides inside all of us. A partner that beats their lover or a human that harms a child is no less a monster than a vampire, because monsters are not determined at birth, but rather shown throughout their lives as the actions they are not forced, but rather choose to take. I do not know you, Your Grace, nor could I ever claim to understand you. We hear tales of your past and, quite frankly, I don't have much faith in tales, but I do have faith in the good of others. I've been here a long time and seen the acts of kindness you have shown so I can only have faith in you that you may consider this father's request."

"I sent him away initially," he adds. "But his words lingered and the thought of them marching to their deaths while knowing I could help eventually led to my following. I arrived before the battle, but the man that came to speak to me was among the dead."

"And you never learned his name?"

"Unfortunately not. There were many soldiers and I suppose I didn't ask the right ones. Even the paperwork was pathetic, most weren't identified properly until weeks later. By then I had already left."

"There weren't that many soldiers from Chandri," I recall, attempting to dig back in my memories. "What did he look like? Anything really specific you remember? I may know him. We could put a name to a face!"

Soran lacks faith based on his thin lips, but he gives in after contemplating a few moments. "He was a tad taller than me, short dark brown hair, mm, green eyes, I think? Quite a few scars..."

Could have been the blacksmith? He was called to the capital when the war began. Many were taken to help stock up supplies and he hadn't survived the battle when he was sent back as a soldier. But the thought of the blacksmith is set aside when Soran adds the last detail, "Ah, he was wearing an odd bracelet."

"Odd?"

"A piece of braided rope through a drilled hole in a blue-ish pebble."

I freeze. My hand goes limp in Soran's grasp.

"There were letters carved into it, I think, but I don't remember what they were."

An old memory comes flooding in, one of me running home with a unique blue pebble I found in the river. Dad's birthday was in a few days. We didn't have the coin to get him anything, but that pebble showed up. Blue was his favorite color; I thought I had got my hands on a treasure for him.

"Why don't you make something out of it?" Mom suggested when I showed her. Dad was out in the fields, sweating the days away until he returned to the capital for military duties. "It's such a pretty color. It'd be a shame if he lost it because it was lying around."

"Like a necklace or a bracelet?"

"That's a great idea." Mom kissed my cheek. *"I'll ask someone in town and get you some twine."*

I tugged on her dress before she left. *"Mommy, can we put our names on it?"*

"Hmm?"

"That way when Daddy leaves, we can go with him," I explained.

Mom obviously obliged and the next day when she came back, there were two letters roughly chipped into the stone and a single hole for us to work a rope through. We tried our best to make it look twice, braiding three small pieces of rope and, to us, it was pretty grand and for Dad, even more so. A parent that knew it was nothing more than rock and rope but treated it like it was made of gold, and a kid believed it was gold because of that.

"How lucky I am to have you two," he said, pulling me onto his lap while we were at the dinner table. Mom set our meals down. Dad snaked his arm around her waist, pulling her close while pressing a kiss to her stomach then to my forehead. *"Thank you, Wallie. I'll never take it off."*

And he didn't. The bracelet was buried with him.

"Wallie?"

I blink away the memory. Soran sits next to me, the bridge of his nose wrinkled in concern. A concern that turns to confusion when I croak out, "The letters...are you sure you don't remember them?"

He doesn't answer.

"Were they W and L? Did he have a bright smile and a deep voice? Was he tan, like he spent everyday in the sun? Were his hands trembling? They always shook when he got nervous or in the early morning." Honestly, I can't expect Soran to remember every little detail. He already admitted he doesn't and yet I'm rattling off questions as the truth settles in;

It was my dad. Dad went to Soran begging for help. Dad's words are the one that rang with Soran, that he still remembers word for word to this day. He's the reason Soran came to help, the reason I'm here today and what really led to me being able to get anywhere near Soran. Although he obviously had no idea what would happen, it suddenly felt like Dad had been watching from the grave all this time.

I'd laugh if I wasn't already busy crying. The tears are muffled by Soran's chest when he pulls me into him, holding tight. His fingers comb through my hair, a tender kiss pressed to my temple seeing as he must have easily put the pieces together.

"Theodus," I whisper. "My dad's name is Theodus and my mom's is Lucetta."

"I imagine he was a great dad."

I nod, unable to form another sentence. The tears refuse to give me a moment to breathe, but Soran doesn't let me go through them alone. He sits quietly, allowing the emotions to wash over me until I settle. My breathing evens out and the trembling stops. Soran retreats, peering down at me as he wipes the waterworks from my cheeks, which are now heating up under the attention.

"I'm sorry," he suddenly says. "I wish I could have done more. I wish I could have..."

He doesn't need to finish that sentence for me to know what he means. I shake my head when taking his hands in mine. "You have nothing to apologize for. After the attack, we probably would have been slaughtered as a message so, because of you, the village was saved."

Soran says nothing. We both know that's the truth.

"What are the chances? That my dad went to you, that you found me and that I wind up at your doorstep."

"I believe this is what some may call divine intervention," he teases, but honestly, it kind of feels like that.

The carriage suddenly comes to a stop. We must have arrived. I'm frantically wiping the tears from my eyes, averting my gaze when the door is opened by the driver. Soran steps out first, giving me a few more moments to attempt to compose myself. When I turn around, he's waiting with a warm smile and outstretched hand, one that I take without questioning. Our fingers interlock and Malatis rubs up against my leg the moment I'm out. That lasts no more than a second though, before he goes over to Soran. Still, I wonder if he could sense what happened.

As we walk hand in hand towards the train, I pay no mind to the countless bewildered and astonished stares. Instead, I'm wondering what Mom and Dad would think if they were alive. Had Dad survived the battle and Mom not have fallen into despair, if I somehow still ended up at the estate, would the both of them have laughed over this string of events? Would they have seen this as fate?

I peer up at Soran, who catches my gaze and tilts his head curiously. I smile at him just because and he smiles back as if it's instinct. My hand squeezes his; heart hammering in my chest from such a simple action.

When I first arrived at the estate I claimed not to believe in fate. Now though, I'm really starting to question it.

☩☩☩

Hi, I'm fate :D But oh wow, Soran met Wallie's dad! How sweet~

✝Seventy-Two✝

The last time we were in Isabe it was snowing. Now it's spring. Although the weather is somewhat cool, the town somehow looks vastly different without the white snow and icy chill of winter months. Shops now line the streets with their doors or windows open to invite customers and the cool breeze in. Flowers are beginning to bloom along the roadside or within hanging pots outside of shops. Most are wearing light jackets in the pleasant dusk hours.

We arrive at a different hotel than where we stayed last, at least I think we do. I don't remember the name of the first hotel, but the inside of this one looks different so I'm assuming that's because it is. When the clerk learns that the shared room is for Soran and me, there's a very quizzical stare that lasts all of a second until spotting Soran's cold glare. Nothing is said, at least not here. I'm sure he'll have a lot to say to his co-workers once he's gone.

We're led up to our room, me tagging along a few steps behind Soran. It took me nearly the entire carriage ride from the train to the hotel to convince him. I'm still a butler so I shouldn't be walking beside him. I shouldn't be sharing a room with him either yet here we are, now standing in our shared room with the clerk swiftly excusing himself.

Examining our home for the next few days is the best excuse I have to pretend like Soran doesn't exist, otherwise I may explode. The door leads into a foyer where a table sits for small belongings next to an open closet. An office rests to the left with a simple black desk and shelving units. A tall narrow window sits behind said desk with heavy golden curtains. To the right is an open sitting area with a couch and armchair facing a warm fireplace. A dining table with four chairs is located near the balcony doors. There's a bookshelf that is filled from top to bottom, side to side with novels that appear to range from horror to romance. There are two doors are the farthest back wall revealing the separate beds as Soran promised. They're identical in size and shape, probably simple to royals but

extravagant to me with plush beds, intricate headboards, silk sheets and heavy satin drapes.

Malatis has already deemed the couch his domain. He is getting fur all over the place. My butler instincts are about to kick in because I have this itch to suddenly clean it up. Soran doesn't allow that though as he's quick to ask, "Shall we go out for dinner or would you rather eat here?"

"H-Huh?" I spin around, a little startled to find Soran near. He gives me a swift once over when spotting my obvious jump of surprise. "Oh, um, here, if that's ok? I'm a little tired actually."

And incredibly embarrassed, but I digress. Give me the evening to work up the courage to go out for dinner some other time. I'm still growing accustomed to all the sudden attention. While Soran always garnered attention, it was much different when it was focused on only him. Now that focus is on us. The eyes of others sometimes makes me feel so small even with Soran beside me. I wonder if there will be a time where I am used to it, or how long that will take.

"Of course it's ok," he responds, already heading over to the menu resting on the coffee table before the couch. Malatis raises his head only for Soran to sit so he may instead rest it in his master's lap. I would roll my eyes, but I'm not even surprised. What an attention whore! Says the one that wishes Malatis would show him a little more attention. I lead a tough life.

"What would you like to eat?" he asks.

"Something fancy!"

Soran chuckles. Taking a seat in the chair, I quietly wait for Soran to order. There's a string on the wall that calls for room service. They arrive shortly after to retrieve our order. Then Soran rummages through his luggage in his room. I'm not sure what he's doing, only hearing the soft sounds of movement. I'm scratching the arms of the chair because I have no idea what else to do and being alone together in the hotel room is making me incredibly nervous.

Well, Malatis is here, but he's already sleeping on the couch. I don't even understand how he fits. His wings are laying close to his back. Somehow the weight doesn't make him slip to the floor, suppose he has had all his life to practice his perching on thin objects with giant wings.

When Soran returns, he has a book in hand. I'm a little surprised when he hands the book to me until he explains, "We should go over this first before attempting any practice."

The book looks familiar. I'm fairly certain it was in the library and I either overlooked it or deemed it too advanced for me to read on my own. With Soran's help, I may be able to manage. Flipping open the first page, I scan over the words that tend to give me a headache after prolonged exposure. Sometimes my vision goes a little wonky too, but suppose that'll stop with more practice.

"What do you know of lumen thus far?" Soran asks. He has returned to the couch. Malatis' head has also returned to his lap. Now there's a loud purring in the room as Malatis happily allows his favorite person to scratch behind his ears. I'm a little jealous because, again, I'd give you all the ear scratches if you came to me! Back to the question at hand though.

"Not much more than what you've already told me," I admit. "Lumen comes from Aena and vilis from Tethros. It resides in everything and grows alongside that which it inhabits. It's stronger in humans because it matures along with us."

Soran nods. "Think of it like your own strength. If you don't stretch before running, you can cramp up. If you attempt to carry more than you're used to, you can hurt yourself. Casting spells or enchantments is no different. Your body is not accustomed to the sudden command and usage of the magic within you, which can lead to dire consequences."

That's quite a simple way of saying death, but I get it. No need to freak out the new student, although he's already a little worried. Who knows how I'll handle using magic.

"Was it like that for you? Is vilis different in terms of using magic?" I ask, even if I question whether I should. Perhaps it's not a good idea to always poke questions about vilis or vampires seeing as others have their eyes on us now. If I know more than them that's more reason to mess with me, but Soran deems this an ok topic since he does reply.

"I can't say much about humans as they aren't capable of using vilis without losing themselves. I never had an issue with magic usage though. It came naturally, but learning spells and enchantments have only expanded my knowledge and usage so they certainly helped. Unlike humans, I also don't have a BP."

"BP?"

"Breaking point," he answers. "BP refers to when one can no longer use magic without the risk of those severe consequences I mentioned earlier. Everyone is different naturally, but with prolonged magic use you can use more and more."

"So it really is just like working out."

"Basically."

"Why do the books always make it sound much more complicated?"

Soran huffs. "Most at The Academy are long winded and like to come across as more intelligent than they actually are."

Oh the sass! Seriously, one day I want to be able to dish that out to mages at The Academy or even the royals themselves. Would feel really good to put Cathen in his place especially, freaking jackass.

"Can you tell what mine is then?" I ask. "My breaking point."

"I can take a guess, but one never knows until they try." Soran focuses on me for a quiet moment. I avert my gaze since the fixation, whether it was requested or not, makes me giddy. "You're slightly above average."

I'm not sure why that makes me blush, but my cheeks are on fire. I hide my face, which has Soran chuckling when he says, "Red suits you."

"Shut up. You're just teasing me, aren't you?"

"No. If someone had taken the time to teach you when you were younger, I imagine you could fight with the best of mages."

"Now you're just trying to flatter me."

"I would never."

Peeking through my fingers, I catch Soran's smirk that he attempts to hide. I say attempt, seeing as he fails miserably because I already caught him. Before I can complain though, he stands up. Malatis is not pleased even if Soran gently sets his head aside.

"Come here," says Soran, resting cross legged on the floor. He gestures to the space in front of him, instructing that I do the same. I try to put some space between us but he grabs my thighs, which tense immediately, then pulls me close so our knees are touching. If my blushing earlier had settled, it's back to full force now.

"We can at least start this now," he adds, which confuses me because I don't know what "this" is. Soran takes my hands in his. The cool touch of his fingers makes my arm break out with goosebumps. If he notices, he makes no mention of it.

"W-What are we starting?" I question only to yelp a moment later when Soran's touch zaps me. Not just his touch though. My whole body tingles as if the electricity pulsed from my fingers through my arms to my chest. It slowly courses through me like a growing warmth. "What the hell is that?"

"To use lumen you must be able to sense what you have within you," he explains, sending another zap, which I learned isn't so much painful as it's just shocking. It's simply a sensation I haven't felt before. "You must be able to tell if you have used too much or if you aren't in your best condition. Knowing lumen is there and feeling it are two entirely different things."

"So you're...making me feel my lumen?" I ask in such a confused tone that I sound like an exaggerated actor in front of a very bored crowd.

"I'm passing some into you. Think about where you feel it, how much is there and the way it moves. At night, before you rest, level out your breathing and try to hear it."

I'm not convinced I can hear it. I've never "heard" magic in me before so I'm not entirely sure what it means, but there's no denying what I'm feeling right now. Soran does this a few more times until the shock isn't a shock anymore. I know that it's happening, feeling as if a warm water is seeping into my fingers, but that's it.

There's a knock at the door. Our dinner is ready and smells delicious when it's brought in. For some reason, Soran is specific on how they set the table. The server nods along, doing as they're told while glancing quite a few times at me. I pretend not to notice. Once they're gone, I'm about to take my seat when Soran holds out his hand.

"Wait a moment," he orders, causing me to cock a brow until he takes a sip of my drink. My stomach drops upon realizing why. I hate that he even has to test for poison, taking a bite of the food, even holding the silverware as if he thinks there may be something on it. Everything must be alright because he gestures for me to sit.

I only realize when Soran sits across from me that the curtains are drawn. I'm fairly certain they were open when we arrived. I didn't even notice Soran closed them all, but he has and I think I know why. I also think I know why he instructed the server to set the table in a certain way, so that his back is towards the window. If someone were to attempt anything, Soran would get hit instead of me.

"We could just eat at the coffee table," I suggest, causing Soran to raise a brow.

"Why would we do that?"

"You're sitting by the window in case something happens, right?"

He pauses in taking a drink.

"Just like you tasted the food for poison." I poke at said food. Although it's ok to eat, I'm suddenly incredibly weary of a meal. "I don't like that you have to do all this."

"Unfortunately, this is what we have to do," he says, which is like a nail being driven into my gut. I understand that, but it doesn't make me feel better. Still, he tries. "You will learn to wield magic one day, Wallie. When that time comes, you'll be able to protect yourself in a way so, until then, we have to be incredibly patient and cautious."

"I know...but I don't like it."

I didn't mean to make Soran feel bad, but based on his solemn stare, he definitely does. I'm quick to apologize, which is only met with a shake of his head. He shrugs it off, pretending that this doesn't bother him. Deep down, it has to. I can practically taste his silent statement; *I told you so.* I don't regret this decision of us being together, but there's no denying how complicated the situation is. There's no denying how I feel, but Soran is right. The more I practice magic, the more I can protect myself.

✝✝✝

Learning magic time, yay! Do you think Wallie will learn to use magic and defend himself? Soran will be so proud if he does~

✝Seventy-Three✝

So that night I do as I'm told after managing to read the first chapter. It was a tad different than the last one I tried to read; more going over what Soran said but in far more complicated terms. Good thing he was there to make things less complicated.

Anyways, after reading and when we go to sleep (in our separate rooms), I lay in bed attempting to feel and hear the magic within me. Admittedly, this is a bit ridiculous. There's nothing, no sounds other than my own breathing and Malatis' quiet snores at the bottom of the bed. I don't think he was very pleased with being instructed to sleep with me, but he appears fine now by hogging up all the leg room.

I'm not sure how long I lay awake, but nothing really changes. The only sensation within me is that of my own jitters, thinking of Soran in the other room and wondering if every night we will be using separate rooms. Great, now my face is on fire again, but this is a perfectly logical thought! We're both grown ass adults interested in sex and now dating so, yes, I'm thinking about it. We're at a damn hotel! We have privacy, well--I peer down at the sleeping Malatis--some privacy. And it'd be a complete lie if I said I don't want to sleep with him because I definitely do.

Damn it, I'm meant to be focusing on learning magic! Wallie, stop thinking with the head between your legs!

"That's it, I'm just going to sleep," I grumble to myself, swiftly turning onto my side and disturbing Malatis with an accidental poke to the ribs. He raises his gaze, deep green eyes narrowed on me in the night. I apologize but he still slaps me in the leg with his tail.

"Hey!" I rub my leg, groaning when he stretches out, somehow taking up even more of the bed.

I'm too much of a pushover to make him stop so I end up sleeping curled up in a ball through the night.

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Our first day in Isabe consists of visiting the mine. Wyvin was who we met up with before and he is still there now. Nothing has really changed other than the lack of snow. There are still outhouses around the edges of the mine. Levels of platforms and ladders lead below or to long tunnels into the dark hillsides. Soran's very presence has all on edge. They walk with heads bowed and gazes lowered. His steps seem to echo, making those in his wake flinch. Perhaps he's more feared now with Malatis tagging along. Many squeak or jump back in fear of the winged cat that sticks close to me, but most probably think he's there for Soran instead.

I'm given the same safety gear as last time when following Soran into the mine. He's going over some of the beams as well, inspecting them himself. I don't really know what to look for. I imagine a crack in the wooden or stone beams isn't one that would be missed by an inspection team or workers so I'm not of much help. Instead, I meander behind him admiring the dimly lit tunnels.

"Return to the outhouses with Malatis," Soran eventually orders.

"Huh? W--" I catch myself before asking why. Wyvin and a few other workers are nearby and, well, to them I'm just Soran's butler.

Soran easily catches on to what I was about to say though and goes on to explain, "I'll be going on ahead to inspect the collapse. Wait in the houses until I return."

There will be no arguing, not that I plan to. The tunnels are unsettling. Some sections are so low that our heads brush the ceiling, others are so tall that the darkness comes across as a never-ending void. Being here has taught me that I may be claustrophobic, or simply not crazy enough to go underground. Either way, I'm content with leaving.
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The building we wait in must be some kind of lounge area for workers, either to eat or simply take a rest. It's a long narrow building with a few windows and mostly filled with couches and two sets of bunk beds. A few belongings linger in the cupboards or atop them such as jackets, hats and even books. Malatis is pawing at the strings on a pair of boots until I hiss at him to come over. He eyes me suspiciously but actually listens, choosing to instead gnaw at my own shoelaces.

"Hey, don't ruin my shoelaces," I hiss at him, trying to pull my foot away but he catches it under his paw, or claw? I mean, he has the legs of a bird but he is definitely more cat like. I don't know at this point. Malatis is complicated even in his appearance.

I attempt to be a good student again while Soran is gone. Closing my eyes, I lean into the couch and take deep breaths. There are sounds everywhere though. Malatis is trying to entertain himself somewhere in the room. There are workers outside either cracking jokes or discussing what they need to do next. Today is pretty windy so the windows rattle with the breeze. My feet start to tap until I remind myself not to.

"This isn't working." I throw my head over the back of the couch with a groan. This will take time, I know that, but it's hard to start something I don't completely understand.

"Ok, ok, no giving up," I tell myself, shaking my hands as if I think that'll help.

Ah, maybe it will?

I hold up my hands, remembering Soran holding them last night. The memory puts a smile on my face and isn't that a part of lumen? Memories, and feelings like Soran said. Remember what it feels like.

I slip onto the floor, which results in Malatis watching me curiously from across the room. Crossing my legs, I imagine Soran sitting in front of me, our knees touching, his hands holding mine. The weird zap coursing through me then the warmth. This time, when I close my eyes, it's suddenly very quiet. I don't hear the wind or Malatis or the noise outside, not even

my own breathing. There's only this sensation of something moving through my veins. I don't know where it originates from, only that it's everywhere, constantly flowing as if it's a river searching for the ocean.

Something touches my shoulder. The river stops. My eyes open and the sensation is gone in a flash.

"Wallie."

I peer up to find Soran leaning over me.

"What a good student you are," he teases while holding out his hand, which I take begrudgingly. I don't see Wyvin or the others behind him.

"If you saw that then why did you interrupt?" I ask, holding back my desire to childishly stomp. "I did it. I could feel it!" I wave my hands crazily through the air. "Lumen just going and going and going, but now it's gone."

I can't sense even a little in my wiggling fingertips.

"You will in time," says Soran, pressing his hand to the small of my back. We're heading towards the door with Malatis right behind. "And I did let you sit there for about five minutes."

Huh? I didn't even hear him come in.

"Wow, you were watching me? What a creep," I tease, earning an eye roll from him. Before we get to the door, I ask, "How did it go? The collapse...was it an accident?"

I'm nervous to hear the answer because I'm nervous over how Soran will feel. He doesn't like others taking advantage of him because of who he is. He also hates that others are attacked instead of him. If someone purposefully collapsed a tunnel resulting in the death of his workers because he's a vampire, I can only imagine how that will make him feel.

Soran's cold eyes are enough to answer. I scowl before he responds, "It seems purposeful so an investigation will be well underway. With the mine,

there's always a chance this is about competition, even a way to lose workers."

"What do you mean?"

"If you were given a choice to work in a mine with terrible safety standards versus one with great safety standards, which would you choose?"

"Great safety standards."

"So if you wanted more workers, but didn't want to give them better wages, what is a possible way to do that?"

My jaw drops in a mix of horror and disbelief.

"Steal them by making a competitor look bad. Suddenly there's a collapse and job openings at another mine, force workers to quit out of fear or have the mine closed for too many suspicious accidents," Soran explains even if I managed to put that together.

"That's fucking disgusting," I hiss.

"Indeed it is, but this is only speculation."

Speculation or not, this has made me realize an even scarier truth. Soran may be a vampire, but even if he weren't there'd still be truly terrible people in the world. To think some of these attacks, whether physical, mental or monetarily, have more to do with basic human greed and the desire to one up a competitor than Soran's condition, it's completely insane. The world truly is a terrifying place.

"Once we stop at my mining company then we will head out for dinner," Soran explains once we're alone in the carriage.

"O-Out for dinner?"

Soran meets my gaze. "You don't want to?"

"No, no, I'd like that."

"Good." Soran smiles when returning to read a report.

The carriage ride is quiet afterwards, at least until my heart rings in my ears when Soran slips his hand into mine.

✝✝✝

***whispers* it's a date~**

✝Seventy-Four✝

Mature Scene: As usual, let's keep everything respectful. Thank you.

Dinner is nice and all, but the comfort that comes with a pleasant chat over food turns to jittery nerves the moment we return to the hotel. Malatis has claimed the office now, resting on the rug with a shoe in his mouth. Weirdest part? I have no idea whose shoe it is because it isn't mine and it isn't Soran's. Did he steal it from someone's foot or their room? Either way, the familiar has a stolen shoe that neither of us attempt to take.

Soran is at the small dining table working on a few papers rather than in the office. I'm laying on the couch with the book that I'm meant to be reading, but the words aren't registering. From time to time, I peer at Soran, feeling my heart flutter into my throat.

The pen scratches on paper. His hand moves swiftly across the page. His brow is furrowed, lips set into a thin line. Sometimes he takes his bottom lip between his teeth. Sometimes I hide my shame behind the book for staring at those lips for far too long.

You're being a pervert, Wallie! Read the book. Focus. You're going to learn magic to defend yourself in order to help not only Soran, but admittedly everyone at the estate too. If you can't be continuously pushed around then others will be less likely to attack or at least reconsider, right? Damn it. Focus. Focus. Fo-

"Why don't you get some rest, Wallie?" Soran suggests, bringing my attention back to him when I have been struggling so hard to get it away.

"It's getting late," he adds with a nod towards the clock on the wall. I take a glance to find that the time is a little after eleven. We'll be heading out tomorrow around eight so I shrug.

"I'm alright," I answer, sitting up to watch Soran stack up the papers. "Are you done for the night?"

He rolls his shoulders. "Yes. I'll finish up tomorrow."

More jitters. More nerves. More staring for longer than I should, only this time I'm caught. Soran smirks, which doesn't help the heat beneath my cheeks. If I'm not beet red already then I will be in a moment, I'm sure.

"What are you staring at?" he asks, peering over his shoulder like he thinks there may be something behind him. There obviously isn't so he glances back at me with a raised brow.

"N-Nothing," I sputter, dropping back onto the couch with a book over my face.

That book is pulled away in a second. I yelp in surprise then go completely silent when the book is replaced with Soran. He's leaning over the couch, peering down at me with a teasing grin. The book is in his grasp, held almost lazily off to the side. I'd reach for it, but sitting up means getting even closer to him. Close enough to feel his breath so I merely point and ask, "Are you going to give that back?"

"Will you use it to hide?"

"Probably."

"Then no."

I'm not sure what he's doing or what he wants. The two of us remain speechless, locked in a heat stare that has my heart rate escalating until I'm fearful of disease or permanent damage. Twisting my fingers into my shirt, I finally ask the question he gave earlier, "Now what is it that you're staring at?"

"You, obviously."

I roll my eyes. "Why?"

"Need I answer when you were doing the same all evening?"

Ah, I was caught.

I bite my lip and turn away.

"Don't stay up all night reading," he says when finally dropping the book back into my hands. "Goodnight, Wallie."

I grunt when the book hits my chest, fingers fumbling to hold it before it slides to the floor. Soran is walking away while I sit up fast. He's about to head into his room, the room which he likely won't leave for the remainder of the evening. And the thoughts from last night hit me, I don't want to sleep alone tonight. In fact, I don't really want to sleep at all.

The words fumble out of my mouth; "May I join you?"

Soran halts. I'm fairly certain I do too. I'm not breathing, probably not even blinking when he faces me. There's a brief moment of shock then a dusting of pink grows under his eyes, reminding me of our time on the terrace when I took his hand. I smile when his jaw goes a little slack.

He doesn't respond at first, which admittedly makes me nervous but then he says, "I'd love it if you did."

He holds out his hand. The book is set aside when I go to him, slipping my fingers into his. I'm not sure if nervous is the correct way to explain the sensation settling in my gut. Perhaps a sense of eagerness accompanied by a somewhat odd form of hope. Eager because it's not like this is my first, but it's a first with Soran. Hopeful that this is a step in the right direction, another way to show him that I'm staying for good, that our feelings are mutual.

I'm met with a kiss the moment the door is shut. A familiar kiss of ice and yet it lights a fire in me hotter than a forge.

"I didn't think you'd make the first move," he says with his forehead against mine. Our lips hover so close that every word causes them to brush.

"Were you planning to make a move before we left?" I ask, only to take his lips in another kiss. Judging on how quick he's unbuttoning my shirt, I'd say he at least wanted to try.

"Not sure," he replies, slipping my vest off me. He keeps his eyes closed when he says, "I worry you will regret this."

"Specifically this?" I ask, causing him to flinch. He's thinking about us in general again so I take his face in my hands. His eyes widen when I sternly say, "I won't ever regret us, Soran. Believe me."

He takes my hand with a soft smile. He leans into the touch as if it's the first he has ever felt. Then he's kissing me again and I wonder if it's because he doesn't want to speak or he doesn't know what to say. Either way, I don't mind as the flames within me roar from every touch of Soran's fingers against my trembling skin. He's affectionate and gentle even here; fingers dancing over my skin from my neck to my cheeks to my hands, as if he's kissing me all over. The thought brings a blush to my cheeks, not that it wasn't already there.

We're moving towards the mattress, tangled up with each other. I stumble over the end of the bed, causing us both to chuckle into the kiss. A warm sound that only adds to the excitement building in my chest. When my eyes flutter open, I briefly catch Soran's warm red gaze. His eyes are bright, red gems in the dim light of the room. And when I close my eyes, I still feel that light hugging me close.

Passion is a fickle thing, one that most see as almost erratic in nature. I once thought it too, but I'm learning better. Passion can be a long kiss filled to the brim with affection that can only be shared through such a simply complicated action. Passion can be a soft smile between gasped breaths or hands gently mapping out newly exposed skin. Not rough or desperate, but curious and eager for another moment, just another second as if this is the most precious moment in all our lives.

Soran marks my neck, brief butterfly like kisses that almost tickle until he scrapes the skin with his teeth, nothing more. I shiver from more than the touch; the cool air of the room meets my chest when our shirts tumble to the floor. Soran's skin is smooth as porcelain, cold but reactive. His muscles tense or tremble when my fingers memorize his shoulders and his arms and his chest and his neck, anything really. The excitement builds and builds

until I fear he can hear the racing of my heart, maybe even feel it pressed against his chest when his arms coil around my waist.

Our tongues meet in a kiss that turns heated. Belts and pants are quickly shed next along with an agreement that Soran will take the reins this time around. I try not to turn away when my back meets the mattress, completely exposed to Soran as he's perched over me. It's hard not to grow nervous when he's looking at me like that though. Words fall short. The expression is hard to describe, but I imagine the feeling is mutual. He's bare too, allowing me to take in the tone muscles that flow one to the next. My eyes move south, to the dark happy trail and his arousal that is soon pressed against me when he moves back in for a kiss.

The moment our bodies meet, we're moving; hip to hip, chest to chest. The pleasure builds, coiling in my gut, burning between my thighs as we grind. We melt into each other. He grips my thigh, nails pressing into skin as he moves faster. My hips mirror his own, feeling his heat and the pleasure that has my back bowing. Soran's low groans rattle in his throat, the sound enough to burn my ears.

My fingers twist into his hair. I bite at his bottom lip, holding it between my teeth after a particularly rough thrust against me. Our kiss ends only for Soran to descend, moving against my neck, my chest, my stomach, my thighs. Every caress of his lips sends me into chills, more so when I see where he's heading. The moment his hand grips my base I groan, then curse when that hand is placed with a far more exquisite heat.

The muscles of my legs spasm when his lips move against me. My arms tremble, each breath a quick gasp typically followed with an almost embarrassing mewl. Unfortunately, or maybe it's fortunately (suppose it's a bit of both?), Soran's fingers cause the pleasure to subside, successfully cutting me off from finishing. I'd call him a tease, but I'm not exactly hoping for the night to end yet either. I'm also a tad curious why the preparation isn't so uncomfortable without oil (magic, it's some fucking magic, isn't it?), but we're kind of in the middle of something here so I'll save that question for later.

I end up throwing my arms over my eyes when Soran takes this time to be a curious twat. My body is completely flushed from the attention and exhilaration already. He's only making it worse by moving his hand slowly over my thighs, up my sides, to my chest and my neck. Everywhere he touches leaves a burning trail in its wake while he ends up adding a second and third finger. By now, I'm thrusting back to meet him. When his fingers press deep, I curse and dig my heels into the mattress. Pulses of pleasure rock me with every curl of his fingers or gentle caress of his hands. His lips ghost over the skin of my hips, nipping at the flesh then soothing it with his tongue. He chuckles at the quiet moan that slips past my lips.

"Don't hide," he finally whispers when pushing back my thighs. The bed creaks. I sense him leaning over me before he pulls the arms from my face, pinning my wrists to the bed. The smile on his face isn't taunting, only warm, as warm as the feelings he gives me when placing a simple peck to my lips.

"Do you want to stop?" he asks, which has me staring at him like he's fucking insane.

He actually chuckles when I actually ask, "Are you fucking insane?"

"I wanted to make sure." He smirks. "I'm a gentleman after all."

We laugh, with me quickly leaning up to return the gesture, leaving a quick kiss on the edge of Soran's mouth. He looks a little taken aback, but that shock is forgotten after the first thrust of his hips. My groan echoes around us. Soran's scent encases me, as does he, his arms on either side of me as he thrusts within me. Brief kisses are shared between gasped breaths and low moans. My fingers twist into the blanket, gripping onto reality when the pleasure builds to the point that I start to question that reality. The pace is slow at first, allowing me to adjust until we're both desperate for more. Then the breath is knocked from my lungs Soran's hips slap against my own, never allowing me a moment to catch up.

I lose myself to the pleasure, meeting Soran's thrusts with desperate jerks of my own. Grunt after pleasured grunt tickles my ears and each movement of his hips into mine has me slipping a little further. When I reach out for him,

he knows what I want, leaning in for a kiss as he drives into me. My high pitched moan is silenced by his kiss, but the moment we break apart I'm crying out broken pieces of his name. Hearing my own whispered back or split between a groan has me shuddering. I'd laugh at how ridiculous that is, but at least the feeling's mutual so I guess we're both ridiculous.

The cold touch of his hands accompanied by the growing heat between us is an odd combination that I didn't think I'd like, yet I want it to last forever. I end up gripping his arms, feeling the strained muscles beneath. My hips attempt to dive back to meet his, hoping for him to go deeper. When he does, my spine nearly snaps in half, back bowing from the pleasure and thighs trembling with the end growing near. Electric, fire, warmth, butterflies, whatever one wishes to describe it, all of them course through me until they take me all at once the moment Soran's hand wraps around my base. The powerful thrust of his hips, the intense focus of his eyes and the quick jerks of his hand force my senses into overdrive as my orgasm slams into me.

Soran doesn't take long to follow, his thrusts having grown erratic mere moments before my own. It's my name on his lips when he kisses me, and it's my arms he curls into afterwards, twisting his own around my waist. The air is humid. The bed is a mess. The room smells of sweat and the cinnamon scented candle dimly glowing on the bedside table.

I don't feel like moving though, not yet, not with Soran holding me this tight or the gentle touch of his lips against my neck. I'm a little peeved that he isn't as breathless as I am, more so when he catches my pout and somehow reads my mind.

"I told you, I don't tire easily."

"I will kick you out of the bed."

Soran holds me a little tighter, leaning against me when he says, "Go ahead, I'll take you with me."

"Don't rub it in that you have endless stamina."

Soran's smirk has me blushing long before he says, "Don't worry, we can always work on your stamina."

I avert my gaze, refusing to admit that after what just happened I am more than ok with that.

He snickers. "...you aren't saying no."

"Shut up."

He kisses me, which I guess is technically shutting up, so I'll let that slide.

✣✣✣

There ya go. Our boys are finally in need of only one room lol

✝Seventy-Five✝

I wish I could say our business trip continues smoothly, but that would be a lie. The affection that should have followed after our night together is shattered during breakfast when I awake in an empty bed. There are whispered voices outside the door then rushed footsteps. Something is slammed. I think there are raised voices just outside the hotel room. Malatis is awake at the bottom of the bed. His muscles are tense, eyes flicking between the door and the window. His tail swishes from side to side.

After redressing, I step out of the room with Malatis following. The table is partially set, but there's no one else present. The tablecloth is ruffled as if someone had gripped tightly between their fingers. Then the door to the hotel room swings open with enough force to dent the wall.

"Wallie," Soran whispers upon entering. He doesn't attempt to hide his frown.

Although I'm fairly certain I know the answer, I still ask, "Is something wrong?"

"We won't be dining here this morning," he answers, which confirms my fears.

"There was something in the food?"

He nods. I'm not sure if I'm grateful that he doesn't hide the truth from me. The thought that someone really did try to poison our food makes my stomach churn, not as much as the poison would have, I bet. Ah yes, dark humor to cope with the situation, lovely.

"This happened far sooner than expected," he says with a few steps forward. He takes my hand that I only realize now is shaking. "I suggest, from now on, we eat together at the estate as well, just to be safe."

"That would be really sweet if it wasn't unbelievably dark."

Soran squeezes my hand. He's apologetic, but I don't want him to be. It's not his fault, although he would claim otherwise. We've already discussed the possibility of an attempt happening, but I'm frightened all the same. As if Malatis can sense that fear, he rubs up against my leg. A reminder that he is here, that there is more than Soran watching over me.

After some investigating, no perpetrator is found. They likely ran the moment the poison was put into the food or drink. Soran is furious so we end up moving to another hotel, not that I think it'll be of help. If these assassins only drop a bit of poison into a stew or a drink then they can do that easily by sneaking in or merely paying someone off that likely won't be caught. Thanks to that incident though, the remainder of the trip is unsettling. Paranoia sets in. I look over my shoulder more times than not. Soran must notice this. He doesn't speak on my paranoia, although I imagine he has a lot to say. Our new hotel only has one bed seeing as I can't stand the idea of sleeping alone. It's unfortunate that it has more to do with fear than anything else. Soran's arms around me in the dark is about the only way I can rest.

Whatever the investigation leads to in Isabe concerning the mining accident, I'm not entirely informed about, not as if I'd understand half of the situation anyways. About all I take from it is that there will be some correspondence with the king since Soran has found some clues to who did it and, like before, he will take matters into his own hands if he must. I shiver at the thought, but considering what the jerks did; sacrificing innocent people for money in a fake mining accident, then I hope Soran chops off their heads.

Admittedly, most of my spare time on the business trip is spent training. The near death experience is easier to handle when there are other matters on my mind. Even Malatis is getting in on the training action, and by getting in I mean he likes to sit on the hotel room floor and head butt me in the face every few minutes for not paying attention to him.

"I'm busy," I hum after the second or third nudge, by the fourth I can't say no and put training on pause. "Why do you only want to be pet when I'm busy?"

Probably because I end up petting him. Earning the affection of a giant cat beast is tough!

Not much more is done than focusing on my own magic. By the time we're meant to return home, I don't have to basically meditate every night to feel the lumen coursing through my veins. The sensation is always there. I notice the brief changes, like when I get excited over the trainride, how it accelerates, coursing through me stronger than before. Once or twice my excitement must show because Soran takes notice and smiles.

"Suppose we could start...actual magic soon?" I have no idea what else to call it, which Soran must take notice of because he chuckles.

"If by actual magic you mean spells then yes. At this rate, we can work on a few."

"What's the most annoying spell there is?"

Soran tilts his head.

"I want to use it on Cathen."

He snorts. "I will make sure to teach you a few then."

"Great!" I'd likely get caught, but if I can annoy him only a little then we can count my training as a success.

The train ride consists mostly of Malatis napping and me insisting Soran stop purchasing more food and drink. At this rate, I'm going to drop dead from overeating!

Before I realize it, we're back. I'm relieved that we're home, which I've come to realize is just that now; a home. Not the estate or even work, but a place that I feel safe even after being kidnapped from there; weird...but I'm not questioning it. The peaks are visible over the trees. The carriage is rocking back and forth as we grow closer. Before we arrive though, along with our new promise to eat every meal together, Soran drops another

suggestion that has me coughing, "We should probably move your room upstairs as well."

I'm hacking on my own saliva for a solid minute before asking, "I b-beg your pardon?"

"After what happened, and considering what will continue in the future, it would be best if you weren't downstairs with the other workers." He scowls. I understand why when he adds, "Considering that the ones that can get to you easiest are them."

He makes a point, and he hasn't even brought up the fact that there are spies among them. We both know it. Hell, Higra outright told me the truth, although I doubt she'd harm me...then again, you never really know what a person is capable of until it's too late.

"There are plenty of rooms. You can take your pick," he says as if it's no big deal. I'm freaking out even more because, won't this make work even worse? Soran doesn't have us living in a disgusting hovel, our rooms are more than enough, but getting a guest bedroom upstairs...it's basically a hotel suite!

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I grumble, thinking of how others will avoid me even more.

"If you don't want your own room, we could always share." He smirks when the choking resumes, only much worse.

"I-I'll take my o-own room!" Which is a bit of a ridiculous reaction considering what happened over the trip, but whatever, I'll react how I want to.

"Good. Choose when we arrive and we can move your belongings upstairs."

I can't respond to that so I melt into the seat until we arrive. Soran is smirking the whole time, obviously enjoying the situation. Screw you, this is a big deal! Then again, there's already no hope of returning to normal

with my co-workers. It is what it is. Hopefully Hael doesn't completely abandon me too though.

Higra greets us at the door. She pays attention to Soran while I scurry by to choose my new room. Malatis follows, prancing through the halls appearing as relieved to be back as me.

"Which one should we pick?" I ask him since he, unwillingly, spends most of his time with me. Malatis walks towards Soran's room. I'm swift to follow, hissing to him, "We can't pick any of these rooms. They're closed off, you know that."

And for good reason. I haven't stepped into the rooms of Soran's family since he told me their stories. I'm not sure if I ever will again. The sorrow was felt long before I knew the tale. I can only imagine what will happen now that I know the truth, that I have names and stories to what has been left behind. These are essentially their graves, silent and cold.

Malatis ends up walking to Soran's door. I'm not surprised. He'd be with Soran all day everyday if he could, I bet.

"I'm picking my own room," I tell him. He doesn't budge so I wave him off and head towards the first door on the west side of the hall. I've seen all the rooms considering I've cleaned them. I'm not exactly picky either. Give me a comfortable bed and I'm good so I merely pick the one closest to Soran, otherwise I may not sleep at all.

The room is nothing grand like Soran's. There's a canopy bed with wide windows and a small sitting area in front of the fireplace. There's a wardrobe with a dresser and a bookshelf that is somewhat useful now considering that I'm slowly learning more day by day. The colors are pale shades of blue with dark browns. Sitting on the bed, I bounce a few times to test out the mattress that is as soft as the hotels. I throw myself on it, relishing in all the space until Malatis joins and now there isn't so much space left.

"What do you think?" I ask as if he can answer. "Should this be our new room?"

He yawns and makes himself comfortable on the bed.

"Take that as a yes."

"Did you even consider the other rooms?" Soran asks, appearing in the doorway with a wry smile.

I twirl my fingers dismissively above me. "They're all the same anyways. Malatis wasn't much help. He wanted to go to your room so I figured the closest one would be best for all of us."

Soran hums. His deep red eyes hover above me until I sit up.

"You haven't asked anyone to bring my stuff up yet, have you?" I ask when bouncing off the bed. "I'd rather bring everything up myself. There's not much down there anyway."

The curl of his upper lip states he rather not. He may be a second away from actually saying no until the reluctancy fades.

"Fine, let's go grab it then."

"Ok--wait, you're coming?" I run after him when I realize he's heading downstairs.

"Surely there's more than you can carry. I'll grab the rest."

"Don't you think going down there will freak some people out?" I sputter only a few steps behind. We're already downstairs, moving through the hall with a few coworkers staring wide-eyed and slack jawed at the boss that is weird enough to come down here.

"It won't take long, besides, I'm curious."

"About what?" I mull that question over myself. "My room? You creep."

Soran halts so that I accidentally slam into his back. I stumble away, smirking until he states, "I do recall a certain someone gawking at my room quite a few times."

Well, I...damn, can't deny that!

✝✝✝

Wallie's room got an upgrade, yay!

✝Seventy-Six✝

Now it's my turn to be reluctant when checking my room. Hael isn't there, likely continuing his usual duties. The door swings open, allowing the both of us to step in. Soran inspects the room with a curious gaze. There's nothing much to see here. Honestly, the two of us can make one trip and that would be all my belongings. Most of my money has been sent back to Chandri to repay Mom's debts while the rest has gone into savings.

Those few items are swiftly stashed into the same bag I brought with me. There are a few smaller items that Soran grabs until one in particular, a notebook, falls to the floor. I think nothing of it until heading for the exit only to realize Soran is still as a statue.

Glancing back, I ask, "Is there something wrong?"

Soran is holding the notebook along with a few other things. However, he's fixated on the open page and, for some reason, his cheeks are tinted pink then almost as blaring red as mine are ninety percent of the time.

"Soran?" I call.

He doesn't face me, only holds out the notebook, revealing what is written on the page. Now it's my turn to go completely red in embarrassment when he says, like this is no big deal, "Your writing is improving."

The paper is filled with my attempts at scribbling Soran's name. There's no skill, mere squiggles on paper that do get progressively better as they go on. I was impressed when writing them, but now I'm embarrassed and redder than a tomato. In order to spare us both really, I rush over to snatch the blasted notebook. Soran lets me, quickly snickering when I bolt out the door with a few words thrown over my shoulder, "Don't you dare say anything else about this!"

Why I think he'd listen is beyond me because not ten seconds later he says, "I'm excited to see how you improve. One day, you may be able to sign my

name for me."

"Shut up!" I'm never going to live this down...

Rather than listen to Soran's teasing, I rush upstairs to my new room. Malatis is still there, having taken over the whole bed so that the sheets are wrinkled, comforter wrapped around his hind legs and fur all over the room, along with a few feathers. Oh no, the butler in me is screaming to clean it up. Am I going to live the rest of my life with this twitch to always clean?

"Someone is comfortable," I mumble to the snoring cat that doesn't so much as twitch at being called out. He doesn't get up until Soran steps into the room then he's prancing all around said room like a show pony.

"How old is Malatis?" I ask, refusing not to face Soran after what happened earlier.

"798."

"What?!" I holler, staring at the familiar that is half of Soran's age. My jaw drops.

"I found him in The Veil without a mother so I bonded with him and brought him back."

I end up turning around to watch Soran scratch Malatis' chin with a proud smile. That explains why he's so attached. If Malatis was basically a kitten when Soran got him, he was literally raised by him.

"You spoiled him, didn't you?" I grin at the slight hesitation in Soran setting my belongings on the bed.

He rolls his shoulders when answering, "No."

"You hesitated."

"I didn't."

Yeah, Malatis was definitely spoiled, and still is.

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As expected, my move from downstairs results in even more evasion and discomfort among my co-workers. Janein accidentally calls me My Lord once, which I would laugh at if it wasn't kind of really sad. Not eating with my co-workers doesn't help either, but that is unavoidable. For once, I'm not excited for a lunch break considering all that's on my mind is taking a drink only to spew blood all over the place. There's some guilt tied into eating now too. Having meals with Soran should make me feel better, but the paranoia remains, at least until later in the evening when he finishes up work only to keep his promise. Time to learn some spells!

We head out to a clearing near the pond. There's no one here and Soran dubs it safe enough for us to practice. My hands twitch at my side, nerves settling and excitement growing. An odd combination that leaves me jittery as a newborn bird.

"We'll be focusing on defensive spells," he explains. "The ones being an annoyance to us now have had years of experience so avoiding a battle is your top priority."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I saw what those mages did when they snatched me. I can't fathom going up against them.

"Starting out, you will have to rely on hand gestures or incantations. The more you use them the more you recognize and remember the feeling of them. The day will eventually come when you don't have to recite a spell at all," he says while pulling out a few pages from his jacket. He hands them to me. I recognize the writing as his own, a list of defensive spells with brief descriptions of what they are and whether they require an incantation or a gesture.

"The first we'll try this evening is a shield. Do you remember what happened to Cathen when I attacked him at the Day of Aberia?"

I nod at the memory of the golden shield that enveloped him prior to being thrown out the window. The memory makes me snicker.
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"This is a relatively easy spell to cast. It reacts to magic so, unfortunately, this shield won't protect you from an arrow or a sword. That's a bit more advanced."

"Really?" I ask, surprised to hear that. "Why is it easier to deflect spells?"

"Lumen naturally wishes to grow, so although we say it's a shield, it's more like absorption. The magic that hits your shield is absorbed by it, making it stronger in that moment so that it may protect you. Steel though? Lumen has to fortify itself to be as tough as steel to block against it and for that, you need more training." Soran gestures to Malatis, who is actually walking around Janika. I didn't even notice her until now. She's in the darkness of the trees, watching us from where she's laying. "There are also spells that require glyphs, such as the one I used on you when binding Malatis to you. Those will take years of training to perform, but if you're interested in learning the glyphs now, I can make a list."

"Let's focus on the easy stuff first. I still don't know if I'll be any good at this," I answer with a nervous breath.

Soran moves on to showing me how to cast this shield. He has to show me up close the hand gestures, each one as if a letter from a mysterious language and each requiring a motion. Either twist your wrist or bend your fingers or outstretch your arms. The most I end up doing is making my fingertips glow, which has me shouting in surprise the first few times. Not everyday you see your fingers glow, ok, this is a big deal!

In the end, I never conjure a full shield. The most I get are a few sparks flickering around my form as fireflies in the sunset. Soran insists that's normal and I shouldn't worry, but I'm a little dejected that it didn't work.

"We'll practice more tomorrow. You need to rest," he says when guiding me back to the estate. I end up leaning against him. My legs are wobbly and I'm suddenly exhausted, as if I swam laps around the pond all evening. "Don't stay up trying to do this either."

Ah, was it obvious that I planned to?

"I'm serious, Wallie," he says, causing me to peer up at him. "You can't push yourself too hard. This feeling you have now, listen to it. When your body says to rest then rest."

I give a slow nod. "Give me a week and I'll have this down."

"I have no doubt about that."

"I like that you're so supportive, but also can't tell if you're being honest."

He chuckles. "I am being honest. With me as a teacher, you'll learn quick."

"Ah, so it's more faith in yourself than me?" I tease. He plays along by giving a shrug that has the both of us laughing.

My eyes feel heavy though. My body really is exhausted. Soran insists that I have a snack before going to sleep. I don't even talk to him while I eat in my room. My mind is shutting off and I'm out like a light only minutes later. I feel someone tucking the covers in around me. There's a weight at the bottom of the bed, something warm over my feet and purring. Then there's a soft kiss placed on my temple. I smile as sleep takes me.

✝✝✝

I wanted to update this earlier today, but I was busy and I'm gonna be busy tomorrow so here's a weirdly scheduled update lol Anyways, Wallie is learning some magic! Will he master it soon or ever? lol SORAN FOUND THE NOTEBOOK! SO CUTE! And he tucked Wallie in, you adorable pieces of crap >.<

✝Seventy-Seven✝

The first few nights in my new room result in a strange combination of lack of sleep and unbelievably comfortable rest. The nights begin with unexpected paranoia that doesn't wash over in waves but rather assaults with the overwhelming force of an abrupt punch. The once large room grows small. Walls close in, swaying in my vision as a warped expression of dull colors. The bed is too soft. Sheets too warm. Pillows too many and room too dark. A candle is lit. Shadows morph on the ceiling, through the room in an eerie dance that crowds around me until I sit up, curled in the blankets.

Malatis rests at the end of the bed. He watches me; eyes wide and tail gently swaying. I pat his head, running my fingers through his fur then over the feathers of his wings. A sense of calm comes as a blanket of warmth that twists in with the blankets I inevitably bury myself in.

I'm not entirely sure what the issue is. We're home. Soran is nearby. Malatis is here. I'm away from the possible threats downstairs. Perhaps that is the issue; threats. My co-workers and friends may be giving the enemies our secrets. Even Hael may have it out for me, out of everyone downstairs, he knows the most. So although I'm upstairs in this exquisite room that I never thought I could call my own, my worries have not been quelled. How could they when those worries may be asleep downstairs or standing outside my very door? Although the last few evenings haven't pointed to such fears coming to actually pass.

I roll onto my side, facing said door, watching for any movement, listening for any clue. There's nothing. The only noise comes from my own and Malatis' breaths. But the longer I lay here, the more comfortable it becomes. Malatis moves up the bed, curling behind my legs so that the natural heat of his body seeps in through the blankets. My own personal fluffy and feathery furnace.

When I close my eyes, I'm met with the familiar scent of the estate; freshly clean sheets, the scent of the garden somehow pushing in through the windows, the familiarity and knowledge that Soran is only a few steps away eases me into sleep. A sleep that goes uninterrupted until that paranoia returns full force; an icy breath that stings my cheeks until they're dry.

I awake to pale moonlight pouring in through the open window. The curtains billow in the cool spring breeze. Silhouettes are illuminated and shadows darken.

The window was closed when I went to sleep.

I'm about to call for Malatis when my blood shivers with ice prickling against goosebump covered skin. A voice whispers in my ear, only there is no one else in the room other than us.

Hello, Wallie.

The voice is in my mind, a deep horror that chills. My limbs are stiff. My voice won't work. I shiver in place, peering into the darkness only to see nothing, but continue to hear a deep voice.

Don't be frightened. If I wanted to harm you, it would have already happened.

I attempt to knock my leg against Malatis' side. The stranger's voice is like a spell, one that forces me to stop.

A familiar is no threat to me. Neither is Soran. Perhaps he would be if he had the guts to do what needs to be done. That doesn't matter though, I'm only here to chat. I'm curious, you see.

"Curious?" I whisper, uncertain if the stranger can even hear me. Who are they? What do they want? Does Soran know?

I will my body to move. My own limbs won't respond. Fear settles in my chest. Heavy and poisonous as lead.

Of course, curious about the one Soran is so interested in. He's always had a soft spot for humans. Ridiculous, almost sad if you ask me, but I suppose I get what he sees in you. You're not frightened of him. Whether he wants to admit it or not, he doesn't want others to fear him. Another ridiculous and sad occurrence, considering he does whatever he can to incite fear. Always so childish.

"Are...are you Quelen?" I ask. He claimed Soran has a soft spot for humans. The way he spat out "humans," like the very word is sour as spoiled milk, makes me believe he's a vampire so Quelen is the only choice that makes sense. I manage to inch my leg over enough to knock against Malatis' side. His eyes slowly open.

I am.

Malatis is now wide-awake. He's pacing the room. His tail swings violently. The window and the doorway garner his attention. He can't seem to decide which to focus on. Is Quelen nearby? Can Malatis not even find him?

"Malatis," I whisper. The only acknowledgement I receive is an ear twitch. "Malatis, is...is he out there?"

I always speak with him as if he can verbally respond. Obviously that doesn't happen, but the low growl he gives somehow answers enough. With Soran nearby, there's no doubt that he is already aware. There is no chaos within the estate. Nothing to signal trouble other than Malatis' tense demeanor.

Oh, how unfortunate. I'd love to stay and chat, but Soran is awake.

A door slams open that rattles the very rafters. When Soran doesn't appear in my room immediately, I assume that Quelen is elsewhere and he's gone to meet him, or chase him away. That is proven correct when another thunderous noise happens a moment later, presumably the front doors flying open.

I hope we chat again soon, Wallie. Do try to take care of yourself. I'm honestly intrigued about this doomed love.

"Doomed? Is that a threat?" I hiss when getting out of the bed. I can move again, uncertain if Quelen had some sort of spell on me or I was simply too scared to react.

A fire iron rests at the hearth. I switch my gaze between the window and the door. At the window, I close and lock it. The moon shines across a sleeping estate. Not completely asleep though. There's movement; Janika appears through the tree line. She steps closer, sitting near the gardens.

What can you do if it was? Tattle to Soran? I'm terrified!

His sarcasm has me rolling my eyes. I take the fire iron, holding it in my grasp as if I think it can do anything. Having a weapon is better than nothing, at least until I finally do hear voices; real ones, or at least not ones in my mind.

The voices carry from outside so I tiptoe to the window. Malatis doesn't care if he makes noise when crossing the room. He tries to keep me away from the window, pushing my legs back, but I kneel and peek over the windowsill to spot two silhouettes near Janika. I can only assume they're Quelen and Soran. One stands with a hand on their hip, calm and collected while the other waves their hand forcefully. They're too far away to hear, at least I thought they were...Quelen manages to continue the assault of my mind.

But no, that is no threat, it's simply fact. Your love will end in tragedy one way or the other.

The grip on the fire iron tightens. The cool metal stings the palm of my hand. My gaze narrows on the calm figure that, although I cannot see his gaze, I imagine it is directed at me.

You know Soran would never turn you, even if there was a way. You have two choices; grow old and die, leaving Soran behind in a cold and heartless world yet again.

His silence is unnerving, but I fear the answer to my next question even more so; "And the second?"

He will fail to protect you, just like he failed to protect his family.

As much as I hate to admit it; he's right. One way or the other, Soran will be left alone...again. And I hate that I even think of it. I don't know if I'm sick or reality is punching me in the gut, maybe both.

I wanted to meet you, personally, but Soran didn't take that well. I apologize for leaving without giving a proper introduction. We'll officially meet soon, I promise.

The voice vanishes along with the silhouette moving towards Janika. She and Quelen soar into the sky, disappearing within the dark veil of stars. The next breath I take is somehow cooler, as if I've been breathing in toxins my whole life.

✝✝✝

Ooooh, Quelen tried to meet Wallie, what do you think about what? And what do you think about what he said? Our poor Wallie, boy was just trying to get his beauty sleep!

✝Seventy-Eight✝

Barely seconds pass prior to a knock at the door. I jump until Soran's voice calls, "Wallie?"

"I'm awake," I say, as if he doesn't already know. Malatis obviously informed him and, clearly, he was out there speaking with Quelen, who was somehow also speaking with me. Vampires are freaking weird, says the one that is dating a vampire.

The door creaks open. Soran enters in with a frown, shoulders slumped and fingers dangling almost lifelessly at his side. There is no sign of any harm, no bruises or scratches. Suppose I would have heard the battle if there were one, but it's relieving nonetheless.

"What happened?" I ask, only realizing when Soran's gaze drifts that I'm still holding the fire iron. I raise it with a half smile. "I thought...it may be of help."

Soran snorts. He shuts the door. "I was hoping you wouldn't wake," he admits, which I can't blame him for. He gestures to the window. "That was Quelen."

"I know."

Soran's eyes narrow in silent questioning.

"He was...speaking to me." I tap my temple when resting the fire iron back at the hearth. Soran crosses the room, taking my face in his hands. When our eyes meet, his are dark and narrow.

"What did he say?"

"That he was curious to meet me. He was almost taunting—" I stop short, flipping over Quelen's words. I will not repeat them, not when I know how much it'll affect Soran. "I don't know what he wanted."

"No one really does," says Soran when dropping his hands to my shoulders. The tension dissipates with the soothing massage of his hands. "He claimed he came to retrieve Janika."

"And he happened to bother me while here?"

"Quelen does what he wants when he wants. The only one he takes orders from is Karsissia so one never really knows his true motives."

"That isn't very comforting."

Soran nods in understanding. With his hand on the small of my back, he says, "Don't worry. He's gone. He isn't stupid enough to return."

"You really never do catch a break, huh?" I tease only to scowl at Soran's pained expression. He's about to take his hand away when I reach for it, interlocking our fingers. "I was teasing. We knew this was going to happen. I guess I just thought we'd have a little breathing room."

Everyone acts quick against Soran. Everyone acts even when they should know that it's pointless. I guess even awful people have to have hope.

"If Quelen came, you don't think Karsissia will show up too, do you?" I nervously ask, recalling all the horror stories I've heard of her. I've never been one to believe rumors, but even Soran doesn't appear to like her much. She may be as bad, if not worse than the rumors.

"Unlikely. She wouldn't waste the trip here. We aren't worth her time."

My jaw drops because, damn it, that's actually a little offensive! This must show in my expression because Soran chuckles.

"Do you feel alright to sleep on your own?" he asks.

I'm quick to shake my head. There's no use in lying. I'm still reeling from the whole having someone speaking to me through my mind thing. I can only imagine how I'll feel or what I'll do once Soran is out of the room. Malatis is great to have around, but against another vampire? I doubt he'll

be able to stand up for us both. I'm glad he can't read my mind or else he'd probably ignore me for months!

"Well, I know what we'll be training you to do next," says Soran when guiding me to his room. Malatis follows, practically hopping with excitement.

"What is it?" The worries are fading, replaced with excitement. There's no denying that I enjoy learning magic, even if I don't have much of a knack for it. Knowing I am learning to defend myself bit by bit makes this situation a little less daunting.

"There are multiple ways to speak with someone through the mind. Malatis and I, for example, are bound and thus can communicate, but a strong enough sorcerer can force their way in. Warding them off is difficult, but we can at least make sure that you'll be a pest should they try."

The two of us smirk, both knowing that I want nothing more than to be a pest. If anyone is going to mess with me, I'm going to give them a hard time at the very least.

I hop into Soran's bed, patting the space next to me when I say, "It's so nice to have a supportive boyfriend that seems as excited by the idea of me being an annoying asshole as I am."

"Is it so shocking that I'm supportive? Am I not annoying every chance I get?"

"True."

Soran chuckles when joining me. My cheeks warm at the immediate hold he has on me, bringing me close so that my cheek is flush against his chest. He sighs, a sound of relief that burrows into me.

"He didn't say anything to you, did he?" I ask, earning a confused eyebrow raise. He likely thought the conversation over Quelen was over. So did I, but they were chatting for a bit so who knows what was said.

"Nothing worth mentioning," he answers. "The usual teasing, the bullshit excuse to retrieve Janika, although he did make mention of The Unborn."

"They're still causing trouble?"

"Always. They've been quiet lately though, which can either mean they're up to nothing or up to something."

"That isn't helpful at all."

Soran hums. He peers away, a darkness taking over his gaze. There's something he's not saying, but I don't have it in me to ask. My eyes are heavy. I don't even understand much of that world and, honestly, I'm not entirely sure I want to. In the end, I curl closer to Soran, twisting our legs between the blankets. His grip tightens and I fall into a blissful sleep.

My training in magic intensifies over the coming days, which is by no means a complaint. I want to learn as much as Soran wants to teach. He's good at that; teaching, although I question if I'm an exception. Often I forget the man that I met at the estate, the cold and distant boss that doesn't reveal himself to me all that much anymore. However, I see it with others, only now I notice how tense Soran is.

Quelen may have been a jerk, but he was right. It's obvious in the way Soran speaks, how he holds himself, how he acts more like a cornered animal rather than a predator. There's a desire to be closer yet he pushes people away with low growls or intense hollers. He wants to take a step closer, but knows that what he desires won't come to pass, or at least he used to. Now though, when he glances back at me or spots me in the hall, the tension dissipates and for a moment others see the Soran that I know; the kind and thoughtful man that has more love in him than anyone can probably believe. I doubt the brief views of Soran's true self will cause much change, but it would be nice if it helped even a little.

Not much has changed between me and my friends though. Friends may not be the correct term anymore, co-workers that are fearful of me is far more accurate. Any who work with me are meek, as if I'm the lord of the estate.

Same business as usual that I'm slowly getting accustomed to although I don't really want to.

"Been sleeping well?" Hael asks while the two of us clear off the sidewalks outside. There was heavy wind earlier that knocked some of the fresh mulch around. We may not have visitors, but the estate must look spick and span or Higra may have our heads. Soran probably doesn't care as much as others think.

"Are you teasing me about my new accommodations?" I smile because Hael is the only one that isn't acting totally different. Yes, even he seems a little standoff-ish, but he's far better than most.

"A little," he answers.

"Feels odd, like I don't deserve to be there."

Hael hums. He's sweeping off the sidewalk, only pausing in his work when I ask, "Do you still plan to leave?"

He faces me with a frown that's answer enough. He still answers, "Yes. Higra and Layne have written me letters of recommendation."

The thought of Hael leaving puts an even bigger damper on my mood. I won't have anyone else to talk to at work. The one person that may still fall into the friend category is leaving. I try not to show the disappointment in my voice, but I know that doesn't work so well when I mumble, "Ah...good luck then."

Our conversation ends there, although it may have gone further if not for Layne's sudden appearance. He stops short in the garden, gesturing for us to come closer when saying, "We have guests."

Hael and I share confused glances. I'm the only one that asks though; "Guests? Who?"

"The High Priest and Grand Knight."

Oh, great. We really don't ever catch a break...

✝✝✝

Yeah, that's my fault, sorry~ hehehe! Sorry this was late. I just got busy yesterday and forgot >.> oops...

✝Seventy-Nine✝

Third Person P.O.V.

"Your Grace, Lord Movell and Lady Connte are here."

Soran scowls. The displeased grimace stands out against the equally stacked and scattered papers across the desk. Sharp nails tap impatiently against dark mahogany. The chair is knocked to the floor after Soran abruptly stands. Already, Higra is moving through the room to rearrange the papers.

"I told them not to show up unannounced!" He hollers, sensing the headache to come. His teeth grind beneath snarling lips. Focusing, Soran can hear the annoyances conversing rudely in the foyer. Veins throb in his temple that he digs two pointed fingers against.

"Are they alone?" he asks.

"Yes. They brought something with them, although I was not informed what it was." Higra's information has Soran raising a quizzical brow. He suspected a plethora of new shipments in, more Unborn corpses or secrets to search through in hopes to find answers to the ever growing issues. However, by the sounds of it, they haven't brought much and that confuses him.

Thanks to Karsissia and Quelen, the Unborn have slowed in whatever plans they had been plotting. The most Soran has been told is not to worry, take his time, and he certainly has been. He doesn't want in on their troubles to begin with. His involvement is more forced on both sides. If Soran had control, he'd drop search on both sides and hide himself away on a farm in the middle of nowhere. Wallie would probably like that, a quiet cottage for the two of them.

"Your Grace?" Higra calls, cutting Soran's thoughts.

He rests a fist over his lips when clearing his throat. "Don't bother with pleasantries. They're unwelcome."

"As you wish."

Higra bows when Soran steps out of the room, taking his time to descend the stairs. Lord Reiner Movell is the first to greet him. His flamboyant bow has Soran rolling his eyes. At least Lady Silva Connte doesn't mask her distaste. She's grimacing similarly to Soran, the two meeting in a heated stare that could melt the chandelier from the ceiling. Soran wishes it would and, preferably, crush the both of them.

As Higra said, they brought something with them. There's a crate that appears as nothing more than a typical box that could perhaps hold new furniture or supplies. Soran knows better though.

"What part of announcing a visit do you not understand?" he asks. His steps are heavy down the steps, each click of his shoes echoing in the empty halls.

"If we announced ourselves, would you even welcome us?" argues Reiner. His grin is as annoying as his attitude. "Besides, you know why we're here."

Soran sighs. The three stand in silence, two of which glare all the while. Then Soran grumbles his way back upstairs while Reiner and Silva follow. The box is lifted behind them, glowing a soft white, the same as the tip of Reiner's staff. With no one in the upstairs hall, they descend into the basement beneath. Soran has already removed his jacket in time for Silva and Reiner to enter with what they've brought, which is less than expected.

"Is this all?" asks Soran, eying the single corpse within the crate. Inside there's a magically sealed coffin to contain the vilis swirling within the corpse. Both Reiner and Silva step back when Soran opens it, peering within at a plagued victim of Karsissia and Quelen's attack. He knows not to mention the truth. Being the middleman is difficult.

"A plague nearly wiped them out," Reiner explains from a distance. "But that hasn't stopped their meddling. The area around them is growing worse.

Silva's knights couldn't even step into the area without protection stones. Whatever they're up to, the plague hasn't stopped them, I'd say they've gotten worse."

Soran furrows his brow. He hasn't heard much from Karsissia or Quelen either. He figured the plague resulted in a good enough outcome to no longer garner their attention. If they've gotten worse then why hasn't he received any new information from them?

He steps back, arms crossed, when saying, "What do you mean by worse?"

"They're on the move," says Silva. Her eyes darken. "When we got our hands on that one--" she gestures to the corpse on the slab. "We realized that the plague had killed many, but some weren't affected at all. We suspected they were dead until we heard of strange attacks further inland. They're heading somewhere."

"They are not difficult to find. Surely your knights aren't that incompetent."

Silva takes a menacing step forward that Soran doesn't so much as blink at. Reiner presses a gentle hand to Silva's shoulder, smiling when he pushes her back. She huffs.

"These ones are...a pain," Reiner explains and must mean it. It's his turn to have veins throbbing in his temple. "They are quiet, smart, skilled like never before. I fear they either have accomplished what they're up to, or they're about to accomplish it."

"We don't even know what it is," Soran growls. "This could be the extent of their troubles, to sneak into Aberia in hopes to cause some chaos. They'll be taken care of soon enough."

"Easy for you to say from the safety of your home!" Silva bellows. "Innocent people are in their path, those that can't defend themselves against lumen magic, let alone vilis. How would you feel if your precious Wallie was among those innocent people?"

The room shudders. Dirt cascades from the ceiling in wisps of smoke. The estate creaks and cracks as Soran's eyes flash vibrant red to match the anger of his growl, "Are you threatening him?"

Reiner chuckles. "So it's true."

Silva and Soran peer at the priest that says, "We heard tales of your infatuation with a human. I thought it was a joke, but based on your reaction, you really do care for one."

"What of it? Worried that now you can't pass me off as an emotionless monster? Aena forbid that the blood thirsty vampire feel anything other than murderous intent."

Reiner stiffens.

"Neither of you are worthy to even speak his name, so don't," Soran warns. "And if you worry for your people then go defend them. If you wanted my help, you should have treated me as an equal from the beginning."

Silva turns away.

"Why are you here then?" Soran continues with a heavy sigh. "If they are on the move, a plague infested corpse will find you nothing. Did you hope to convince me to help?"

"Plagued or not, perhaps we can find out why some were infected and some weren't, as well as make sure this won't pass to our own people," Reiner replies, acting as if moments ago didn't happen. He has already wiped the tense atmosphere away with a glistening smile that is nowhere near friendly. "The king requests that you discover what you can in hopes to help put a stop to whatever the Unborn are up to."

"Suppose I won't be recognized for my work should you succeed in putting a stop to them?" Soran smirks at the immediate silence. Neither even looked at him. "Thought so, but I suppose not being bothered by annoying priests with a thousand questions is worth the lack of recognition. Be gone so I can get to work." Soran waves his hand dismissively.

"Always a pleasure to see you again, Lord Makai," Reiner says. Silva doesn't bother with a goodbye. She's already heading for the exit. At the door, Reiner faces Soran. "Fill us in as soon as you know more."

"Next time, just send the box. I don't need the two of you showing up all the time. You're bothersome."

Reiner pouts. "Your words hurt."

"Good."

Chuckling, the priest exits the room. It isn't until both are gone that Soran relaxes against the table. Behind him is a corpse that he is meant to already know the answers to. Karsissia and Quelen didn't want to wipe out the Unborn, otherwise, it'd be suspicious. However, for some to be on the move without him being notified? That's troubling and he doubted that was the outcome Karsissia wanted.

"What are you up to?" Soran whispers.

He doesn't linger long, choosing to go to the library. With the doors shut and no one within hearing range, Soran descends once again. He mulls over his memories, trying to pinpoint if Karsissia mentioned side effects of the plague or perhaps something that would lead to where or why the Unborn are moving. However, Soran's thoughts are put on hold when he reaches the end of the stairs.

Something is wrong.

He rushes forward, slamming the doors open to a mostly undisturbed room. Mostly being the key word. One sweep over the room and Soran notices books missing, scrolls, secret knowledge from not only his own research but also given by Karsissia. His blood stills at the thought of how, why and when this happened. With rushed steps, he scours his belongings in search of what all is missing. Scrolls and books are scattered across the stone floor until, hours later, Soran has a list of what's missing, none of it any good.

"Damn it!" Soran hollers, kicking a book clean across the room. It slams into the wall, rattling dust from old, grayed pages.

Head in his hands, Soran growls. Who could have entered without his knowledge and when? Was it during the assault on the estate? Couldn't have been. Soran checked not long after. It had to have happened within the last few days. Storming out, he searches the library next for any clues. The doors are shut and locked to keep out curious employee's. The afternoon is turning to evening. He's meant to dine with Wallie, but the thought that knowledge of vilis and vampires are now out for someone to read has Soran stressing. There's no proof of a break in, nothing to pinpoint how, when, or who, which means...whether he likes it or not, he has to contact Karsissia. If anyone can discover the truth, it's her.

✝✝✝

Uh oh spaghetti o's! What's going on? Who could have stolen from Soran, how and why? Is he actually going to contact Karsissia and how will that go? =O

✝Eighty✝

Third Person P.O.V.

"Your Grace?" Layne calls from the door. His soft knock follows. "Dinner is ready."

Dinner with Wallie, but notifying Karsissia risks her untimely visit. She won't hesitate to try and speak with Wallie, which is the last thing on Soran's to do list. He doesn't want to risk leaving again either. There is no telling how long Karsissia may wish to speak with him once she learns the truth.

"Your Grace?"

"I'll be right there," he responds around a low growl. The doors swing open with his frustrated steps. Layne barely has time to jump back, watching Soran stomp to the dining room where Wallie already waits.

He smiles until spotting Soran's grimace.

"What happened?" Wallie asks.

He was informed earlier of the high priest and grand knights visit. All thought they'd have to run around like chickens with their heads cut off to clean, but then Higra came around to inform everyone not to worry. Soran didn't want them to be comfortable. Admittedly, Wallie laughed at that and was not surprised to hear it.

Soran sits. The chair rattles from the impact. Food is placed before them, which Soran inspects. Wallie frowns, waiting in silence until he knows it's safe to eat. Even then though, he doesn't touch his food. He watches Soran tap the table until his nail actually pierces the wood.

"Soran," Wallie calls softly, bringing Soran's attention to him. His shoulders relax unknowingly. "Did they bother you?"

"They always bother me."

Wallie chuckles. "Yeah, I know, but what happened?"

Soran doesn't know how to answer. Wallie isn't aware of the hidden rooms. Even if he puts on a brave face, he would worry if Karsissia came to the estate. Soran couldn't blame him. He is worrying at the mere thought, but there isn't much else he could do.

"I must call Karsissia here."

Wallie's jaw drops before he sputters, "W-What?"

"I can't risk leaving after what happened last time," Soran explains. "She will come so I am going to send everyone into town tomorrow. You and Malatis should remain hidden. If we're lucky, she may be too troubled to bother you."

"By the sounds of her, I highly doubt that."

Soran bites his lip. "I'm sorry for putting you through this."

As expected, Wallie puts on a brave face, but his eyes speak volumes. They're shaking, as are his hands that are now clutched in his lap beneath the table. "It's fine," he lies. "Must be serious for you to call her here."

"It is. I would explain more if I could, but it's best that you don't know."

Wallie pouts, understandably so.

"Is there anything I should do to avoid her?" Wallie asks.

"Be quiet and if she does come to you, answer honestly, but politely, even if she frightens you."

"I can do polite." Wallie sits up straight, chin held high. "I'm a butler, after all."

"Eh, a mediocre one at best."

Wallie slams his foot into Soran's, relishing in the quiet yelp that follows. Slack jawed, Soran gapes at Wallie's childish response, but he can't hold back the smile that comes next. Even when stressed, Wallie's presence calms him enough to forget for a moment. Only a moment though.

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The following day, the estate is cleared. All workers are sent into town for their random day off, told not to return until nightfall. Wallie remains in his room with Malatis while Soran works from the basement below. He attempts to ignore his own trembling hands when he calls for Karsissia in the same way she called for him. A few herbs mixed into a fine powder that he then uses to draw a glyph on the floor and then he can report to her.

If he hadn't been keeping up on feeding, he wouldn't be able to. After Wallie was kidnapped though, Soran has kept Malatis around and always makes sure to be more than prepared.

The glyph beneath his feet brightens until the vision of Karsissia's library fades into view as pastel red shapes. Soran can barely make out her features from where she's perched on a couch with a book in hand.

She's surprised to see him, but grinning when she calls, "Soran, to what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I will get to the point," he answers. "I was visited by Reiner and Silva--"

Karsissia snorts. She slowly flips another page.

"They brought an Unborn corpse with them along with news that they're on the move. Some have moved further into Aberia and they're, apparently, different."

That has Karsissia stilling for only a moment. She snorts in disbelief then turns another page.

"I told them nothing of the plague, however, I was curious about what they said. I checked my own information I had on vilis, as well as what you
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lended to me, only to find that someone had broken into my chamber without my ever having been notified. There's no trace of the intruder and what they took is most troubling."

Karsissia finally stands. The book slips from her fingers to fall at her feet. Her deep red gaze crystallizes into cool ice when she growls, "Have you always been this incompetent?"

"Is that really what you should be asking?" Soran growls. He flinches when pain rattles his muscles. He can't go on much longer. "You should come to me and see for yourself. I must go now."

Before Karsissia can blow a top, Soran steps out of the glyph. The vision disappears, but it will be only a matter of time before Karsissia shows up. Mere moments pass before the room brightens searing red. Soran covers his own eyes, hissing in the blinding light that lessens to reveal Karsissia's fuming form.

"What has been taken?" she bellows, storming over to Soran. He prepares himself for the hit, but his neck still snaps when Karsissia's palm stings his cheek. It could be worse so he doesn't complain.

"Most of my research into the Unborn, almost everything you sent with me--"

That doesn't sit well with her. She's practically on fire with rage.

"As well as some minor scrolls that I imagine were taken to throw us off the scent of the true culprit."

Karsissia places her hands on her hips. "You say that as if you have one in mind."

"I do; the Baylor's."

She shoots him down immediately with a wave of her hand. "Couldn't be. Quelen has been keeping an eye on them. They haven't made any unusual

movements, unless you really are that worthless," she growls. "How could they have broken in here?"

Soran can't answer that because he doesn't know.

"Did you know?" he asks. "That the Unborn were moving."

Karsissia is looking through the list Soran made of what was stolen. She doesn't look up when answering, "No. The humans have it wrong."

"Are you sure about that? Someone breaking in and now some Unborn are unaccounted for."

"Quelen and I set loose the plague. Tell your humans to count the heads again, those that they can't find are dead, not missing."

"So you claim."

"So I say!" she screams, shaking the entire room so that jars tumble off of shelves or bookcases cave in. Smoke and dirt swirl in the open air, shielding the view of all but Karsissia's burning gaze.

The two are stuck in a heated stare, one that grows when both mull over what is happening. No human could break in without Soran knowing so that leaves one true culprit; a vampire. And who was meant to keep their eyes on the Unborn? A vampire. Who had come to Soran's estate with the excuse to pick up Janika and bother Wallie thus giving them time to break in before making themselves known?

"Quelen," Soran growls. The moment the name leaves his lips, Karsissia howls with laughter.

"We all know if any were to betray us, it'd be you," she accuses, refusing to believe it.

"Then tell me who else it could be. Quelen is the only one that could break in here without a trace. He is the one that has been watching the Unborn and relaying the information to you, hasn't he?"

"You're being ridiculous." Karsissia throws the list at Soran. He doesn't bother catching it, allowing the paper to float to the floor. "I came here for nothing. A human broke in, Soran, accept that."

"You want me to accept it because you can't accept that Quelen is pulling your stri--"

"Hold your tongue." Karsissia's voice sends Soran to his knees. He freezes, incapable of moving a single limb beneath the pressure of Karsissia's narrowed gaze. She leans in, hissing between pointed teeth, "You should show more respect, Soran. Your precious human is near and I'm famished."

Soran can't even growl. He trembles in Karsissia's grasp until she lets up. The pressure was so immense that Soran dropped to the floor first, relishing in being able to move. Slowly, he stands, head lowered and hands shaking at his side.

"I will call for Quelen and we will discuss these matters," she says. "You will continue to look into your own affairs. Do not trouble me with such ridiculous theories again."

"My apologies."

As quick as Karsissia came, she vanished in another flash of brilliant red light. She may be gone, but Soran knows that she is as worried as he is, otherwise, she would have gone to see Wallie.

The situation is more dire than he suspected.

✝✝✝

Hmm...is Soran right to suspect Quelen? Will Karsissia speak with him? At least she didn't mess with Wallie lol That counts as a break!

✝Eighty-One✝

Wallie P.O.V.

I half expected to come face to face with the bloody queen, but that never happened. The visit from Karsissia was lackluster, which is a term that is likely rarely used in reference to her. I never knew when she arrived or when she left. As grateful as that makes me, I cannot deny the oddities that are transpiring after her visit.

Soran told me nothing, only that they spoke and she left. When I attempted to get an actual explanation, I was met with a brick wall. He refused to budge, wouldn't give a single clue to what earned her visit and why she left so hastily. Then, he started to disappear, spending long hours on his own, although it was no where anyone could find him.

We have our meals together where he's so out of it that I often talk only to be met with a dim stare. He'll apologize then ask a question that has already been answered. The eyes speak. Dull red, gaze physically present but emotionally distant. There may not be jitters or paranoid looks thrown over his shoulder, but the minuscule actions that seem like nothing pile up.

Malatis is on high alert as well. The last few days he has stuck to me like glue, rarely taking his long afternoon naps and even staying awake most evenings. I don't know how much sleep he truly needs so I've been worrying that he may pass out one of these days. When I attempt to receive answers from Soran, he insists everything is alright.

He's lying.

What is one to do against the world leagues above them? Magic and mystery and villainous acts have been thrust into my life that never considered the possibilities. Although I train long into the evenings, although I can cast a shield and send shockwaves to knock back any that grow near, the abilities can't even be considered scratches in the armor of

those that threaten me. I am a singular ant, useless and alone, easily crushable.

"Not telling me what's wrong worries me more," I speak to the only one I can confide in now; Malatis.

We're in my bedroom surrounded by mounds of books and notes. Since the start of my magical training, I've only gotten better with reading too. Practicing every night results in reading practice too. Soran has been kind enough to leave notes in places that I've struggled, allowing me to easily learn. When skimming over the dry ink, exquisitely set against raised paper, I imagine that, in another life, Soran would have made an excellent teacher. The image of him standing before a class of children, book in hand and smile warm, makes me laugh. I think he would have liked that.

Reaching out, I comb through Malatis' fur. His ears flick, either out of enjoyment or irritation. One never really knows with him.

"I wish you could talk and give me answers." I half expect him to actually start. He merely blinks at me. "What can't he tell me about that concerns a visit from the High Priest and Grand Knight as well as Karsissia plus his disappearances? The Unborn?"

More blinking.

"What are they up to and why is he so worried now?"

There are no answers to the seemingly endless questions that blow away with my heavy sigh. With the position I'm in, what else is there to do but study and hope, when I need it, I'm ready to defend myself. The next time anything happens, because there is no denying that it will, I'll be ready and they won't be. I'll take their surprise and use it to my advantage. How's that for strategic thinking?! I'd gloat, but Malatis never cares and Soran has vanished again.

Malatis suddenly hops to his feet. He growls when the door swings open to show a breathless Hael. His flushed face darkens. Either having to do with

Malatis' narrow gaze or rushing. Regardless, he calms enough to say, "His Grace has gone to the castle."

"What?" I jump to my feet. "When?" I search the room for answers. "Why?" I receive none. "How do you know?"

"Janein was in town picking up some supplies when there was a huge commotion. Guards swarmed to the palace. She overheard some speaking, that His Grace grabbed Cathen right out of The Academy then went for the palace." Hael casts a nervous glance over his shoulder. There are rushed footsteps now echoing through the halls. Frantic calls. Slamming of doors. Chaos is slowly overtaking the estate. Outside voices of my co-worker ring in panicked calls.

"What's going on?"

"Higra worries the Baylor's may retaliate so we're going to the bunker."

"Soran wouldn't put us all at risk like that."

"Are you not coming then?" Hael gestures behind him in reference of the bunker. The thought of being locked in a room with spies of the Baylor's, only myself and Malatis as protection, is daunting. I have my answer.

"No, but thank you for the warning."

"Wallie." Hael furrows his brows. He says nothing more. He doesn't need to. My decision is my own though so he leaves after another pleading glance over his shoulder. The door shuts quietly behind him yet the sound thunders in my mind.

I look to Malatis. He peers back.

"What the hell is Soran doing?" Heading to the window, I peer out in an attempt to see any signs of the knights or even clues to an attack upon the castle. There are none. The sky is clear and forest quiet. There is no smoke, no cries on the air or the thumping horror of armored footsteps. Even Malatis is alright with my inspecting the window.

"He didn't actually go to the castle, did he?" More questions that don't receive answers. Still, I close all the curtains, casting my room in shadow. Only the dim chandelier above lights the room and the words I attempt to read. They filter in one ear and flow out the other.

I listen and hear nothing.

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There's an abrupt bang from somewhere below. The front doors. They close shut equally as loud. My worries are postponed for the sudden bombardment of sound. Then they intensify. Anxiety gnaws to the bone. There are footsteps nearby, moving swiftly. I worry over my bottom lip, questioning who is here and why. I glance to Malatis. His calm slips into me. If he isn't on high alert then there's no need to be. That is proven correct when the door swings open. Soran is there and he doesn't even offer a hello.

"Pack," he orders, tone unnerving and unusual.

He hasn't ordered me in so long that I can't recall the last time. For him to do so now is telling, more so when he begins to do the packing for me. He's at the wardrobe, flinging my few clothes onto the bed then grabbing the bag placed at the bottom of the wardrobe.

Clutching the book I was reading to my chest, I stand and watch his frantic movements. The estate is silent save for the rustling of my clothes. With the curtains closed, there's no telling if the situation has changed outside or not. Somewhere something has changed though, resulting in Soran's peculiar demeanor.

"What are you doing? What's going on?" I attempt to calm him by pressing a hand to his back. Muscles flex beneath the thick fabric of his jacket as if waiting for an assault. His hair is slightly ruffled, perhaps from nervously combing through it.

Recalling what Hael said earlier, I pry for answers by asking, "I heard you grabbed Cathen and went to the castle, is that true?"
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Soran doesn't respond. He only stuffs what he can into a bag. There are only clothes within. The bag probably weighs very little, which is seemingly what he wants. Swinging his head around the room, he states, "Leave the books. I will get more another time."

Our anxiety is only feeding into each other. Not knowing what is going on is as dangerous as knowing at this point.

"What are you talking about? Soran, tell me what's going on!" I demand, stepping away when he attempts to take my hand. His brows furrow. The red of his eyes brighten. His hands shake. Mine aren't much better.

"Is it about the Baylor's, have they done something? Are they actually on their way?" I think of the others downstairs. Even if they're in a bunker that protected them from the last attack, I'm doubtful it will last against an army, which is certainly what the Baylor's would send. Immortal vampire or not, they know Soran won't forgive himself if he is the reason more die and they use that kindness against him.

"We need to get everyone out then if that's the case," I add.

"It's not the Baylor's," he hisses through clenched teeth. His shoulders slump forward, eyes downcast. "For once, this has nothing to do with them. I made sure of it."

"This?"

"I don't have all the pieces yet, but even without them, I know something bad will happen. Soon. So we need to leave." Soran gestures to the open door. He holds out his hand. "I will inform the staff. Higra has access to their retirement packages so all will be fine should we not come back for a while."

"Does this have to do with your odd behavior the last few days?"

His lips form a thin line. The muscles in his hand tighten until veins are bulging from the skin. He forms a fist, breathes out slow then opens his

palm once more. "Yes. We cannot stay, Wallie, not when the enemy may be at our doorstep."

"I don't understand. If it isn't the Baylor's then-"

"Quelen."

My eyes widen. Though Soran has never had anything kind to say about the other vampires, I never imagined they'd turn against each other in such a way that Soran needs to up and hide. Of course, this is more for my sake than his.

"To keep this brief, someone has stolen from me. I believe it was Quelen's doing, meaning he has betrayed us. He has information that has been long kept hidden and I worry what he plans to do with it. Karsissia's visit concerned that."

The blood in my veins runs cold. I worry I will freeze then splinter into dust. "W-What kind of information?"

Soran frowns.

"About vilis...and vampires?" I don't know why I'm asking when the answer is obvious. Perhaps I hope I'm wrong or I hope Soran will lie to me in this case. He doesn't lie, but he doesn't necessarily tell the truth either. Silence is a good act of aversion that he chooses to take.

If that is true then what does Quelen plan to do? Is he working with another, and who, why? These are the pieces Soran likely doesn't have and is hoping to discover.

"Then...then his last visit?"

Soran nods. "Likely had little to do with you or Janika and much more with whatever he's up to. Although Karsissia disagreed, I decided to pay the Baylor's a visit to make sure they weren't somehow trying to trick us. I can't say that I got the information from them without a fight, but for once they aren't the problem. It's Quelen."

Soran slips his hand into mine, tugging me along towards the door. Malatis follows. The halls are empty yet somehow so small. I feel crowded in a vacant room.

"As I am, I am not confident I can keep you safe from him," he admits. The hold on my hand tightens. With his back to me, there is no telling the expression he wears, but the tension in his shoulders are clue enough. "It is best we find somewhere to lay low until I have a better idea of what's going on."

There is no arguing against that. I wouldn't have one even if I were given time to try and come up with one. Quelen is a foe I couldn't stand against even if I studied magic all my life. If Soran is not confident to stand against him then, yes, this is our best course of action, even if I dislike it.

"Where will we go?" I ask when we reach Soran's room. He packs even quicker for himself than he did me, although there is a hefty bag of coins accompanying his belongings. I'd be worried about it being stolen if Soran were anyone else.

"Oddly enough, the best way to evade Quelen is to have no plan at all."

That has me raising a brow.

"He knows far too much about me, therefore, we cannot go anywhere he is already aware of. We'll find a small town somewhere to stay."

"And how will you get anymore answers if you're away from-" I twirl my arms in the air like a windmill in reference to everything. "All your information that will likely lead to what Quelen is up to?"

"I have more than enough as is. I only need time to think and act."

We're heading downstairs. Soran leaves me only once to inform Higra of what's going on in the bunker. Malatis waits with me in the foyer until he returns. No one is with him, all likely waiting a bit longer in the bunker or listening to Higra explain the situation to them.

"Will you try to get in touch with Karsissia again?"

Soran shrugs. "She won't see reason unless I have hard proof. Not because she trusts him, but because she's too proud to admit she was wrong."

"What will happen if you're right?" My question stumps him. He blinks rapidly, silently. "If he is a traitor, what can you do?"

He's immortal, same as Soran. He's more powerful, so everyone including Soran claims. There is Karsissia, but what will be her answer? Torture him for a while then set him free, chain him up for all eternity. There are not as many paths to take with a vampire.

"I don't know. We will figure something out," he answers. Soran presses his palm to the doors, swinging them open to the familiar that will soon turn into the unknown.

Then that door slams shut when Soran stumbles away. He throws his hands over his ears, silently screaming as his eyes become pools of crimson. Trembling legs carry him away. Quiet gasps and low moans pass his lips. He whimpers like a beaten dog, tearing into his own hair.

"Soran, what's wrong?!" I try to go after him, but Malatis pulls at my shirt. The tug has me tripping over my own feet, barely catching myself on the wall. Malatis puts himself between me and Soran for some reason. He's growling, but his focus isn't on anything in particular. He's peering about the room in search of an adversary. So am I.

"Something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong," Soran repeats, swaying and cracking his neck. Veins are throbbing in his skin, clearly visible, skin flushed red in irritation and pain. The estate begins to tremble, quaking beneath our already unsteady feet. Soran drops to the floor, curled up in a ball. A mist forms around him, black fog creeping in crude silhouettes of thin hands that grasp at him until he's pinned to the floor.

Malatis howls, hissing and snarling. He lurches forward, but is knocked back by cracks of red lightning. His body smashes into the doors that swing

open from the pressure. Now I'm calling for him as well, frantically switching my attention between the two. Malatis rests outside, struggling to stand while Soran is somehow being pulled through the floor.

"Soran!" I scramble towards him, watching as the floor beneath him burns red.

The mist grows, encasing him. His body is disappearing, a single arm clawing at the floor only for his nails to pierce it like soft flesh. The floor brightens until even his vibrant eyes are dull in comparison.

When I close in, the same lightning emerges. Lumen pulses through me; alive and breathing. There's blinding light. Searing pain. Abrupt shocks. Nerves burning like snapped wires. Then darkness.

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***sips tea* how 'bout that? Tehehehe, so, Karsissia didn't bother Wallie, but there's still trouble brewing! What's happening? =O Will our boys be ok?! If you really must know, you can check out my patreon. Actually, the last chapter for WMAM will be posted on there tomorrow ;)**
www.patreon.com/Twoony

✝Eighty-Two✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Soran descends into darkness. Pain rolls over in waves. A shrill scream tears aparts his insides, as if someone has reached within and is holding his organs in the palm of his hand. He's pulled through the dark, dragged like a rag doll with no control of where he's going. There's pain, but he isn't certain it's his own, and a woman's voice screaming like the sounds of nails on a chalkboard.

Then he's dropped, plummeting faster and faster. Wind hisses past, stinging his already throbbing skin until he hits the ground hard. The world around him shifts from black to searing light. Wind turns to thunderous claps of a storm, water pelting against his skin as painful as needles piercing his skin. Every part of his body aches as he blinks until the light fades. He's peering up into a stormy sky, breathing in sand, water and smelling blood in the air. Metallic, copper, but also not quite right, an almost foul taste of rot.

"S-Soran."

Soran groans when turning towards the voice. His eyes widen in a mixture of shock and disbelief upon seeing Karsissia sprawled across stoney debris. Her legs are crushed beneath a mound of red stone. Stone that Soran himself is laying against, the debris crunching and crumbling beneath him when he sits up, confused.

"Karsissia?" he whispers, peering about to discover where he has landed; the Red Keep, or rather, what's left of it.

The familiar dead lands stretch on, the dry earth becoming wet mud that is drowning the debris of Karsissia's once great castle. What remains is mere rubble, crushed skeletons, shattered glass, flames eating away what they can and casting dark gray smoke into an already dark sky. Lightning flashes over, red as blood, hissing when it cracks against the sand.

"What the hell happened?" Soran asks.

He can hardly believe his eyes when seeing Karsissia looking so frail. Her skin is gray as ash, veins pulsing beneath her skin. Blood leaks from almost every orifice, staining the ground around her. She's barely moving. Her wounds aren't healing. She's reaching for him, eyes wide, frightened...Karsissia is never frightened.

He crawls towards her until a heavy hand falls on his shoulder. His entire body stiffens. Something is very wrong. The hand on his shoulder almost burns. His instincts tell him to run. Don't look back. Don't help. Just run.

But the hold tightens when Quelen chuckles, "Ah, look who decided to join us." His voice crackles like the lightning above. "I'm shocked Karsissia had the energy to call you here. Always got a trick up your sleeve, don't you?"

Slowly, Soran faces Quelen. He's leaning down, smiling menacingly. Although it's certainly him, something is off, just like there is something off about Karsissia. The once frightening aura she had is gone. Quelen though, is suddenly far more fearful. His very presence causes an animalistic fear in Soran's gut.

"Best not get close, she didn't call you here for any good reason, I assure you," says Quelen with a hard push. Soran slips against the rubble that rumbles beneath him.

"I've never been called for good reason," Soran argues. He stands, eyes shifting between Karsissia's broken form beneath the crumbled castle and Quelen's intimidating stature.

"True." He chuckles. "She should have listened to you." He steps closer to her. Soran slides himself between them, earning a raised brow. "Are you seriously trying to protect her?"

"What's going on?" he asks instead. A perfectly reasonable question considering how he was dragged from his home only to appear in a mass of chaotic destruction.

Quelen holds out his arms as if to show off his work when laughing, "A betrayal, as you warned her."

"Why?"

"An excellent question that I will answer in time. For now, I need to finish the job." His eyes flash red with the lightning coursing through the sky above. A peculiar pressure slips from him, like a veil that drapes over Soran's chilled skin. He can't move, or maybe he's too scared to.

"You can't finish anything. Leave us be and we'll be after you in no time at all," Soran warns, but all he receives is a chuckle in response.

"Do you really think I'd attack if I wasn't certain I could handle her? Sit back and watch."

Quelen moves so fast that Soran is already soaring through the air before he realizes he was thrown. He grunts when skidding across the wet mud, spitting up chunks of water and dirt afterwards. Karsissia screams. Quelen stands atop the rubble, a mere speck in the distance, with his hand clutching her throat. He drags her out from the rubble, trapping her beneath him. She struggles, clawing the skin from his arm, calling forth the storm. Lightning hits all around them, even scorches Quelen's back, but he only laughs.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Soran bellows. He charges, only to be met with familiar pressure once more. The blast sends him back to the ground, snarling as it crushes him into the wet earth. He can barely raise his head in time to witness Quelen dig his hand into Karsissia's chest. Her screams are the very sound of fear, eerie and painful. Her cries become gurgled with blood as he rips into her like a rabid dog.

Soran watches, mortified by the scene. Quelen's mouth unhinged like a snake, consuming Karsissia's flesh and organs piece by piece. The same fear remains. Although he can move, his nerves are screaming to stay quiet, to back away, to worry because one wrong move and he's dead. He has never worried about death. Not until now.

The air around them darkens in a cloud of purple vilis until only their silhouettes are visible through the mass. A storm of their own rages around them, the power building and battling and consuming until Quelen steps out, drenched in red, his veins pulsing beneath his skin and eyes rolling into the back of his head. His jaw twitches. Neck cracks. Shoulders roll.

Karsissia is behind him, or rather, what's left of her. Torn skin. Broken bones. Nothing more than a bloody skeleton, much like the ones that once consumed her halls. She grows brittle, bones turning to ash in the storm, mixing in with the mud. Her skull caves in like broken stone then she's gone. And something in Soran went with her, as if he felt her disappear into nothing. No soul, no warmth, no light, no darkness either, simply gone as if she never existed to begin with.

"Everything dies," says Quelen with slow, heavy steps. The earth rattles beneath his feet, crying out in fear of the power that seemingly seeps from his pores. "Even us, although I admit our deaths are more...severe."

Soran crawls back without even realizing it. Quelen smirks.

"How did you...?"

"Come on, Soran, you don't seriously think Karsissia never put anything together," he barks, descending the rubble until he lands in front of Soran's feet. "She held all the answers. She sat back and watched, enjoying being top dog while determining how, when, and if she should meddle. Like with me." He presses a hand to his chest with a crooked smile. "She made me, after all."

Soran shakes his head in disbelief.

"Would you like to hear the story?" Quelen kneels next to him. Soran tries to get up, but he forces him down. His nails pierce Soran's skin, a threat that he listens to and so sits still as Quelen speaks, "I had a twin sister. Her name was Tana. We were street rats in a city that didn't give a damn. You can imagine what my sister did for money, the type of men she put up with while I took the mercenary jobs. Slit a whores throat that knew too much or

kidnap a child until their parents paid up, or kill them all and steal what little they had. We did what we had to in order to survive."

"But the time came when my sister was the whore that knew too much and, well, my boss didn't take too kindly to me killing the men sent after her. We were on the run, starving and struggling from town to town until we came across some Unborn. Back then, they were nothing more than folktales. Something our parents spoke of, monsters in the dark that weren't real, but the magic they taught us was real. We gave ourselves to Tethros." Quelen bows his head at the mention of the god of chaos. "Catch number one to make a vampire; you must give yourself to him. Of course, in your case, it was your father that offered you, a soul that had not been brought into the world yet."

He gives Soran a swift once over, his lips curling into a smile. "Typically, Karissia and I slaughtered whoever attempted to make another vampire. We liked having our run of the place, but our curiosity got the better of us. We had to see if one could be born and so you came about."

Soran snarled, but Quelen wasn't fearful of the growing rage.

"Back to the story though, you can imagine what my sister and I did with our new found power. We returned to slaughter everyone, burnt that city to the ground. Priests didn't take too kindly to that, but the rage and the pain and the sorrow that grew in us, in the ground around us, had to be cleansed. Catch number two--" He holds up two fingers. "It isn't just the people but the land and the feelings there too. Lumen is, after all, memories. Vilis is the pain and anger that festers into a darkness that even light can't snuff out. Back then, priests didn't just kill Unborn. They exiled them, sent their souls to Tethros where we drifted in a lonely, cold, and endless night."

Soran knew of such a night. It was the sensation he felt when put to sleep as a child. It was the place he read of in the research he tried to keep from the world. The gods had to be somewhere, didn't they? Aena in a world of light and warmth. Tethros in a world of night and cold.

"But priests don't exile Unborn anymore, do they? It was deemed inhumane by the church. They helped themselves without even really knowing it." He

chuckled.

"Are you just going to bore me to death with your stories?" Soran asks, scowling at the pout Quelen shows. He doesn't care, isn't fearful in the least. Soran can't blame him, considering that without even starting a fight, he knows he will lose.

"I'm giving you the answers you've been trying to find since the beginning!" Quelen exclaims, patting Soran's cheek like a child.

"Be still and listen." He gestures to where Karsissia once lay, now nothing more than a black scar against cracked stone. "Vampires come from damned souls, those sent to Tethros' endless night and brought back to the mortal realm. We're a shadow in Aena's light, needing to consume that from beings of her world in order to thrive here. But now you must be asking, if Karsissia brought me back then where is my sister?"

Quelen's face suddenly grows serious. His eyes narrow, voice dipping low as he growls, "Karsissia doesn't like being challenged. She wants power...so when Tana was brought back first and proved to be a threat, someone that could threaten Karsissia's reign, she consumed her."

He cracks his neck to the side. Jaw twitching back and forth. He licks his lip. "She always kept that to herself. Always knew she could get rid of us if she wanted. Consume the other. Even among mortals, it's a taboo, isn't it? With us, we didn't even consider it either although that is exactly what we do. We consume lumen. Why can't we consume vilis as well? Drain each other of every last drop and that which ties us to this plane will be no more. I did to her what she did to my sister, whom she claimed was never able to wake. She lied to me."

The earth around him cracks. The air is tense. The wind picks up speed, even the rain cuts at their cheeks. Quelen's anger rages all around them, his voice calling to the storm; "For so long, she had me worshipping the very ground she walked on, relieved to have been brought back although my sister's soul was lost. I spent my eternity attempting to seek a way to awaken her. Karsissia even pretended to help, all the while knowing that it would never be."

He bites at his nails, snapping them like twigs. "I wish I could have made her death more painful, slower."

"How did you figure all this out?" asks Soran. "Surely Karsissia didn't keep it written down and left in the open for anyone to find."

"Of course not, but she wasn't always so thorough." Quelen shrugs. "I wandered the world speaking with Unborn from sea to sea. Some told tales of the creation, who the first Unborn was."

Soran mulls it over, whispering, "Karsissia?"

Quelen nods. "They had to start somewhere and the priests had to exile someone first, but what if it went wrong? And the vampire that came to be had to figure everything out on her own, test after test for centuries. She's, or rather, she was far older than we both guessed. Even she could not silence all that knew of her or helped her. The stories piled up until I put the pieces together to test a few theories of my own." He grins like a child that won their favorite toy. "Not the boring, clueless wanderer you thought I was, huh?"

"Boring and clueless are two things I never associated with you," says Soran. He thinks of the Unborn and what they've been up to and how that ties in with Quelen's betrayal. "So the Unborn...?"

"I was the one that told them to group up. Put all that they knew together, offer them a place to truly learn" He shrugs. "I promised them I would keep Karsissia off their trail enough to get the job done."

"Casting a plague upon them is keeping her off their trail?"

"Her involvement was inevitable and they knew that. Some got away, and now they're on their way to Vashna."

Soran's eyes widen.

"A city absolutely stained with pain and sorrow. You were made from your father's endless wars of expansion. Then your creation led to another war

and even you being there has been an overflowing pot of anguish. All the Baylor's that you slaughtered, even your own family, will be fuel to the fire so I have to thank you for that."

Soran furrows his brow. He thinks over how to get away, wondering if that is even possible at this point. Is this the fear mortals get when they know death is coming? His entire body is numb and stinging all at once.

"We'll bring a storm with us to open the way for more."

"Why?" Soran asks. "Create more vampires and what happens then?"

"Whatever I want, seeing as there's no one to try and stop me now, ah--" Quelen's grip tightens, nails piercing Soran's chest. His eyes darken familiar red, fierce fire against the black storm behind him. "Well, there is one that will try so I suppose I'll have to fix that, won't I?"

✝✝✝

***sips more tea* wow, this is sweet! But seriously, this was not the original direction of the story haha, but I'm still quite proud of myself for working up to it. Definitely no where near perfect, but I had fun and that's what matters ^^ So what do y'all think about Quelen's betrayal and Karsissia's death? Will Soran make it out of this alive? =O**

✝Eighty-Three✝

Wallie P.O.V.

"Wallie! Wallie!"

I awake to Hael's concerned expression hovering above me. "He's awake!" He calls.

Higra joins, appearing stern as usual, but not directed at me. "Get him down to the bunker, now," she orders.

Their voices are too loud. My head throbs. The scent of smoke overtakes my nostrils. Violent coughs rattle me after heaving a few strained breaths.

"I-Is there a fire?" I ask, trying to remember how I got here, sprawled out before the front door. The sky is dark yet there's an abundance of light. Looking up, all I see are harsh gray clouds of smoke.

"Yes," Hael answers when lifting me to my feet. "But not here."

I search for the fire, eyes widening when spotting the fierce flames overtaking the city of Vashna. They eat the sky. Lighting and darkening it all at once. Ash reigns from heavy clouds. Trees go up in flames. They grow closer to the estate, lighting the world in a blazing warning.

Then the screams. I hear citizens crying from the city. There are explosions that rattle the ground beneath our feet. Bursts of smoke and debris into the sky. I sense it too, lumen raging in the city. I swear I see the light through the trees. Taste the magic in the air. But it's violent and unpredictable. My toes curl. Fear courses through me, and confusion, that then twists into worry when my mind finally returns.

"Soran--" I throw my gaze about, desperately searching our surroundings. "Where's Soran?!"

Hael takes me inside. Higra slams the door shut. Janein and Enith are there. They push a heavy bookshelf over, locking us within, although I'm tempted to point out the windows are easy to break through. However, considering what's going on, it's doubtful we have the time to board everything up. They're doing what they can.

"We haven't seen His Grace. Was he with you?" Janein questions, further cementing my fears.

"I...we were..." I press my palm to my aching skull, attempting to mull over the events earlier. I must have hit my head hard because the memories come back in painful flashes. "Yes, he was here and then something, or someone, I don't know, something grabbed him!"

I look to the floor that doesn't appear any different. "I don't know. He was right here and Malatis--" I search for the familiar that is nowhere to be seen. My eyes widen. "Have any of you seen Malatis either?"

"No. It was only you up here," Hael explains.

Both Malatis and Soran are missing. Vashna is up in flames. Bile rises in my throat. "Do you know what's happening?" I ask, allowing Hael to help me limp down the hall.

"No," Higra replies. "We were downstairs where we heard explosions. Layne worried about his family since they sounded like they came from town. When we came up to check, we found you and saw that." She gestures to the orange light filtering in through the windows.

"Where is Layne then?"

"Went running into town," Janein mumbled. "His wife and child are there. I-I hope they're alright."

"Do you think it's the army coming this way? Should we leave?" Enith whimpers, reminding me of what Hael informed me of earlier.

"Why would they take fire to the city if it's us they're comin for? It must have something to do with whatever happened to Soran and Malatis." If Malatis is gone...then Soran must be weak. If someone attacked, I wouldn't have been left out there. And if Soran is weak then he's hurt and I have no idea where he is, how to find him, if I can help or what the hell is going on.

There's no moment of reprieve. One issue stacks atop another when there's a banging on the front door. Hael picks up the pace. We're half way down the hall, nearly to the stairs leading to the basement when a window shatters behind us. Janein screams. Enith curses. Something growls. I swing my head around, peering past the rushing Higra to spot a monster with serrated teeth lingering in the hallway, another slipping in through the window. Their skin resembles rusted leather, long skeletal limbs and talons. I've never seen one in person, but we've all heard the tales.

"Is that an Unborn?!" Janein squeaks, rushing quicker to the door. Her hands fumble on the knob before swinging it open with a loud bang.

Both creatures hold out their hands. Dark smoke twists around their arms, forming glowing purple spheres in their grasp. Janein is down the steps, but the rest of us are barely at the door. My heart pounds like a drum. I think of Malatis and Soran and hope for one to appear, but they never come.

The spheres flash with violent light then come speeding down the hall. So strong their pressure shatters the windows and scorches the floors.

I don't know what I'm doing. I just react out of the sheer desire to live.

A shield of light casts over us, deflecting both the spheres that explode upon impact. We don't feel so much as a breeze. Hael is slack jawed. Enith is in tears, not sure if they are from relief or shock and Higra is shoving us towards the stairs.

"We can't lead them to the bunker," I hiss, flinching when another sphere hits the shield. The hit feels as if I'm going down a steep hill. My stomach is ticklish but it settles into a throb when another and another hit.

"We can't run from them either," Higra argues until I step back, pushing both of them to the door. Enith is already downstairs, shouting for them to follow.

"Get downstairs. I've been practicing. If I can just get these two gone then I'll follow you, ok?"

Higra shakes her head. "His Grace would kill--"

"Soran isn't here!"

The two of them freeze. That truth settles enough to bring a scowl.

"I don't know if he'll be here anytime soon." The thought brings tears to my eyes. "So someone has to hold them off and...and I can. I can do it. Trust me." To prove that, I turn away from them. The Unborn are growing closer, continuing to fire blasts. With a deep breath, I focus my energy into my raised arms that, when swing forward, sends a shock blast that sends them flying down the corridor, shouting in crackling voices.

"I got this." I reassure them with a smile.

Higra tugs on Hael's arm. He hesitates, alternating his gaze between the exit and me. He doesn't leave until I urge him too. They disappear down the stairs. When I'm alone, trapped in a hall with two enemies far more attuned to magic than me, I somehow don't feel anything. The adrenaline kicks in. Fear. Confusion. Worry. Doubts. They all fade, static on my mind that is overshadowed by the shocks I continuously send so they barely have time to get back on their feet.

Keep moving. Don't stop. Don't let up. If I do, I'll die, and everyone downstairs will die. I can't let that happen. I won't leave them alone. I won't leave Soran alone.

One of the Unborn slams their hand against the ground that shatters the floorboards. The sensation ripples through the hall, sending splinters flying and me falling to my back in surprise. My shield dissipates from my lack of

concentration. One is suddenly above me, swinging their talons. I roll out of the way, crying out when they still manage to scratch my arm.

I've tried firing blasts similar to what they were doing earlier, but it always ended with either a sputter of sparks or a massive bang that drained me. Now I try again, hoping for the best. Holding out my hand, I form a sphere no bigger than a teacup, but when it hits the Unborn in his chest, he's sent against the ceiling. Cracks his skull on the floor, and doesn't get up.

One remains, snarling and hissing. He's not speaking. I wonder if he can, or he doesn't even see the need to with me. I'm nothing to him.

I'm fumbling to my feet, moving on instinct alone. The attacks sent my way are frightening. All I can do is cast a shield and shout after every shatter against the light. There are clouds of darkness that sizzle the wood beneath my feet. Glass shatters. Flames erupt around me. I'm stuck in place, breathing in smoke as the Unborn charges with a dagger.

Soran told me that my shield doesn't work against steel. The dagger can pierce it, but I never thought to ask if that meant someone could slip through because the steel did. I don't know if I can handle another blast so I send a shockwave that is deflected by his own conjured shield this time. The dagger hisses when it reaches my shield, cutting through it like thin sheets. The shield starts to crack as he stabs and stabs, never letting up until the shield shatters.

When I send another blast this time, it's massive, sending us both hurtling through the halls. The light is blinding, leaving me dazed as I wobble to my feet, coughing through the debris. There's smoke and dust that filters out through the gigantic hole I just blasted in the hall. I'd be worried, but I'm just grateful to see the Unborn are no longer a problem. Both are missing a few limbs, motionless on the floor.

My stomach churns. I vomit, clutching my stomach that twists painfully. That pain dulls when a voice suddenly shouts through the halls, "Soran! Hey, you rotten bastard!"

She sounds familiar, but I stand my ground, just in case. With my shield up, I peer through the foggy hall to find Lady Connte with a few knights running in. They skid to a stop upon seeing the wreckage. Then her eyes are on me. I expect hatred or annoyance, but her immediate response is to run over while asking, "Are you alright?! Is there anyone else injured?!"

My entire body is shaking. I try to speak, but the words are jumbled together. Somehow she understands.

"Evacuate the staff immediately! Take them to the shelter, hurry!"

The knights rush downstairs. Lady Connte brings out her sword. I flinch until the jewel embedded in the handle brightens. The light catches my eye, as does the sudden warmth that seeps into me. Lady Connte is chanting for a moment and, when she's finished, I breathe steadily again.

"I'm assuming you are a beginner," she says, continuing to help keep me up right. "You used up too much lumen. I could sense your struggles from a mile away."

"I-I just did what I could."

"And you did a good job." She smiles. "They would have slaughtered everyone by the time we got here if you didn't stand up to them."

I choke back a sob, but I'm not sure what from.

"Where's Soran?" She asks, some of the usual Lady Connte returning, which I always thought to be unpleasant. Guess she's only unpleasant with him.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "He was--" I stop myself, eying her suspiciously.

She sighs. "We know he had nothing to do with this attack, but it would be nice to have some damn help."

Just as she says that, the knights return escorting everyone. I'm relieved to see them alright and they're relieved to see me. Hael actually hugs me,

patting my back when he says, "From now on, let the knights to their job."

I'd laugh about that, but Lady Connte brings my attention back to her. She tugs on my arm, trying to get me to answer her. We're all moving to get outside now where carriages await. I explain to her what happened as we're taken away from the estate. I don't know if leaving is the best idea. I don't know anything right now.

✝✝✝

WAY TO GO, WALLIE! *shoots confetti* YOU STOOD UP TO THOSE UNBORN AND HELPED SAVE YOUR FRIENDS! Our boy is a tough cookie >.< But where is Soran? D= Is he going to be ok? Will Wallie be ok?! In case y'all haven't guessed, the end is upon us soon. There will be 5 more episodes so...prepare yoselves~

✝Eighty-Four✝

"He was taken, huh?" She whispers after I've finished the tale. "And now we have a horde of Unborn attacking us."

"A horde?"

"They appeared out of nowhere and now are rampaging through the city, killing all that stand in their path." She hops off the carriage when we near town. Heat from the flames suffocate the city. Homes are nothing more than burning pires. There's chaos. Screaming civilians. Battling priest and knights. Unborn running amok. Blood sinking into the earth until it is stained maroon. I don't know what I smell more of, smoke or copper. There are priests attempting to keep the blaze contained, but trees continue to splinter and burn around us. Ash litters the scarred ground, but our only way out is through town.

Lady Connte pats the leg of one of the knights. "You know where to take them."

"Wait, what about Soran?" I call, frowning at her apathetic expression. "If...if he was taken then it obviously has to do with this. We both know, if he were here, this would already be over!"

All are quiet, probably because they don't want to admit to the truth.

"I can't track someone when there is nowhere to even begin," she says. "I'm sorry, but I need to protect what is in front of me right now. And you need to protect yourself. As much as I hate that bastard--" she grunts, seeming to battle with herself. "He's tougher than anyone I know."

I can't argue against that. Then the knights move us along, taking the back roads through town as instructed. I sit with the others, bent over with my hands flexing together. Adrenaline continues to course through me. Telling me to run back to the estate. Rip up the floor if I have to. Find whatever I can to discover his location. I don't want to wait around doing nothing.

I don't want to be helpless.

"What the hell is that?!" Someone shouts. My gaze follows to where they're pointing, jumping to my feet upon seeing that same strange portal opening above the city; the one that took Soran. Red lightning flashes across the sky. Most scream in terror, cowering. The carriage picks up it's pace. We're about to pull past a building when a figure emerges, holding something, or possibly, someone in their grasp. They descend into the city and I don't know why or how, but I know one of the figures is Soran.

"Wallie! Wallie, what are you doing?!" Hael shrieks when I jump out of the carriage.

I don't know if anyone is following me. I don't care either. My feet carry me faster than ever before. My thighs ache. It's hard to breathe among the flames and smoke. Everything around me is in chaos. Fire. Blood. Corpses. Unborn. Battles. Endless suffering in a giant mass. Fear is tasted in the air. Screams are like steel blades. I keep my shield up. At least then I can breathe and not worry about the tumbling city around me. Buildings shutter, shake and cave in until they're embers on the ground.

Creeping through the city, I follow where my instincts tell me to go. I don't know how to explain it. I just know I'm going in the right direction. Good intentions or not, I was a fool.

"Hello, Wallie."

I freeze.

A hand grips my throat. Nails pierce my skin. Quelen whispers against my ear, "How kind of you to come to me." He snickers. "How nice that we get to finally meet in person."

I'm dragged to my feet with ease. Quelen's grip only tightens when I attempt to struggle.

"I'm half tempted to call you brave for trying to find Soran." He chuckles. "But what made you think you could get near us without me noticing,

hmm? Or were you even thinking at all?"

I glance back at him, seeing him for the first time. His eyes are nothing like Soran's. Not a warm red, but a fearsome red, so alight with light that they're almost blinding. Veins pulse beneath his skin. His lips are twisted into a snarl, stained fangs slipping past his curled lips. He is the monster parents warn their children about. The one that will drag you away in the dark, leaving only pain behind.

"W-Where's Soran?"

"Don't worry. You'll see him soon." He slips his arm around my waist and, with one jump, we're above the city. I clench my eyes shut when we drop. Air whistles harshly against my ringing ears. Then we're on the ground. Quelen drops me so that I grunt when hitting the charred dirt.

The air here is tense. There's pressure. Moving is difficult. My muscles ache when pushing myself up. Then I suddenly forget the pressure when I catch sight of Soran, motionless in front of me. I rip through the dirt, clawing at his torn, bloodstained clothes. His skin is a dull gray, cracked like clay. There's a slow, wheezing breath and his eyes are dim, but they aren't red. They're gold. A soft gold with the faintest sparkle, as if there's a star hidden behind foggy eyes.

"Soran? Wake up. Soran!"

"He won't be getting up. Not without some help, of course."

I glare at Quelen, who stands over us with a wry smile. Now that I'm sitting up, I see that we're likely at the center of the city. There's a vast clearing. Houses and buildings have been burned to the ground, leaving a circle of gray ash. But in that center of ash is that damn portal again, only it's now hissing lightning that cracks into the sky. I wince at the sound. Above, the sky is growing even darker until red lightning starts flashing in the clouds too. The portal is growing bigger and, I swear, I can hear more screaming. It feels as if everything is centering around this single point.

I bring Soran into my lap, cradling him in my grasp. I hold him tight, casting a shield around us both. My hand trembles when I point it at Quelen, who steps back, only acting frightened. Then he throws his head back with a laughter, "Are you serious? Wow!" He claps. "You got some guts. You're an idiot, but a gutsy one."

"What did you do to him? And...and where is Karsissia?" I expected her to be here. Surely she wouldn't allow this to happen unless she's in on it?

"Dead," he answers.

"That's...t-that's not possible."

"No one thought vampires were possible, yet here we are." Quelen chuckles. "Soran was about to join her, but he really is...the odd one." He rolls his eyes. "Suppose there is a big difference between us."

"A difference?"

"Can't you sense it?"

I look to Soran, to the one thing that really stands out; his eyes. That gold spark is there. I focus on it and I feel it. Lumen lingering within him, but that makes sense. He's a vampire. They consume lumen.

"Since I plan to kill you as soon as he wakes up--"

I bite into my bottom lip, recalling what Quelen said during his visit; *he will fail to protect you, just like he failed to protect his family.*

"I'm going to let you in on a secret." Quelen steps closer. I ready a sphere in my hand that he doesn't so much as flinch at. "Only Unborn can become vampires because they give up their humanity, their right to be within Aena's light. And, let's just say, when a vampire dies, we have no soul to give to her. We lost that right. We cease to exist...except for Soran, apparently."

My breath hitches in my throat. Quelen takes another step closer.

"When I drained after last drop of vilis from him, when I tried to tear him apart, he kept on fighting and healing because there was still something there--"

"Lumen," I whisper.

He nods. "Nothing like what we consume or even the small, tainted bit that Karsissia and I had within ourselves. No, Soran's is pure, the same as yours, the same as other humans and I wondered why? What's different?" He kneels a few feet away, red eyes fixated on Soran. "Soran did not give up his humanity. It was taken for him and, should I kill him, his soul will remain. Perhaps he'll move on, or perhaps..." He glances at me. I mull it over and can only come to one conclusion.

"Perhaps he'll come back as something not even you could predict? Something new?" I smile. "Someone that could defeat you."

"There will never be utter defeat," he says. "Darkness and light will always coexist. That is the balance of all things, but yes, perhaps."

I'm scared to ask so the question comes out as a mumble, "Then what do you plan to do?"

He smirks just as Soran groans. His eyes meet mine just as Quelen grabs me. I didn't even see him move. My sphere goes up in smoke, the spell disappearing. Soran drops out of my lap, conscious, but barely moving. He reaches out to me, his nails digging into my pant lag until Quelen drags me away. I'm kicking and screaming, but I can still hear Soran's pained voice, "Wallie, please, Quelen, don't! Don't. Don't. Wallie!"

The portal grows closer. The lightning hisses around us.

"Don't fret, Soran. When you go back to sleep, you may dream of him."

Soran tears into the dirt, dragging himself towards me. There are tears streaming down his cheeks. There are tears staining mine.

I want to say something. I want to tell him it's alright. I want to tell him this isn't his fault. I want to tell him he'll be ok.

I want to tell him I love him.

But Quelen doesn't know mercy and I never knew fear until today. He throws me. Red light flashes above. Darkness creeps into my vision. And the last I see of Soran, he's screaming.

✝✝✝

Hello there! Sorry, Twoony is not here right now. Please leave a message after the tone. *beeeeeep*

✝Eighty-Five✝

I thought death would be cold. A chilly winter night that brightened with a rising sun. But this isn't cold. It's warm. Bright. Lights flash before my eyes, a kaleidoscope of colors until my mind goes numb. Then I drop. Faster. Faster. Faster. Until the wind physically hurts. My mind screams. Maybe I am too.

I see Dad. I see Mom. I see Soran. I see my friends. I see a cottage on a hilltop with a pond and swings. I see my old bedroom, toys scattered on the floor. The window is open. I see Chandri, warm green fields...then the flames and the bodies. Is this it? My life flashing before my eyes. All this information that I once forgot suddenly returns, as if someone is trying to cram the world into my mind.

Silence takes me. I drift through waves that are as dry as a desert. But then I blink and I'm lying atop a stone floor, peering up into a domed shaped room with holographic moldings and shimmering walls. Sitting up, I peer about the room, feeling like an ant among giants. There are open archways so tall that it aches to attempt to see the peeks.

Standing, I realize that I feel no pain. The aches prior to my fall are gone...prior to my death, I guess. Is this death? Is this the afterlife?

Did I leave Soran...?

Tears prick my eyes. I wipe them away when inspecting the room. There's no furniture, only starlike patterns across the floor. My steps click and echo in the vast chasm.

"Hello?" I call. My voice reverberates against the walls. "Is anyone there?" I try again when stepping towards an archway. Each one appears to lead nowhere, until I actually step through and the darkness twists into a maze of upside down stairwells, limitless caverns, and doors that lead nowhere.

"I think I'm gonna be sick." I gag, trying to focus on where I am as I walk down stairs, although I'm fairly certain I'm on the ceiling.

"D...Dad! Mom! It's...it's me, it's Wallie!" I pray to hear their response, even if I feel guilt for having left Soran. If I am dead though then they're here and I want to see them. I want to see them so bad.

But no one answers.

"Anybody!" I trip down the stairs, shouting as I fall and fall and fall once more. There's still no pain, even when I hit the ground. When I sit up, everything is right again. No upside down stairs or twisting columns leading nowhere. Instead, I'm sitting in a sea of golden sand, staring up at an endless night sky painted with what my mind can't even comprehend. Stars. Planets. So many that I can't stand taking it in. My eyes physically burn. Pain returns, so much so that I can't comprehend it either. I turn away, gasping, feeling that same sensation as earlier, like someone is trying to cram the entire universe into my mind.

"What have we here?"

"Ahh!" I scramble away from the strange creature that, honestly, I couldn't get away from if I even tried. I now know why the archways are so tall now. There's a giant standing before me, towering into the endless sky with skin like porcelain with veins of shimmering glass. They're faceless and genderless, like a mannequin at a store. Their voice changes tune from soft to rugged.

"You shouldn't be here," they say. In a blink of an eye, they shrink so they're no bigger than me. In their grasp is a dark blue stone with sparkling writing that changes every second.

There's too much going on that all I manage to squeak out is; "W-Where is...here?"

They're quiet in observing me, tilting their head to the side. They step closer. I crawl back. The sand isn't coarse like what I've known. It's almost soft, like a blanket beneath me.

"Hmm. She will wish to see you first."

"Huh?"

They snap their fingers. This world morphs into a blur, as if it is moving and we're completely still. Then it stops and I think I'd throw up if I could because we're not on land. We're in the sky, nothing beneath our feet, only an eternity of space.

"W-W-W-W-Wha?!" is all I manage to sputter out, which is, also, ignored.

"A lost soul, My Light," says the stranger, peering up, so I follow their gaze. I'm apparently always going to be at a loss for words in whatever this strange place is because, beside us is another titan only she's made up of light beams that flicker with color. Her hair is a sea of stars and eyes flickering flames of golden light. She rests within the eternal night, hovering above it all as her fingers dance in the sky that ripples as if they are waves of the ocean. Another star appears, flickering as an ember until it burns bright. She giggles and finally looks at me.

I don't know why, but she feels familiar, as if I've known her all my life.

"Hello, little one," she speaks with a voice that vibrates the world around us. "You're far from home, aren't you?"

"I uh, tha, um, this, you see, uh...a-are you G-Goddess Aena?"

"Ae-Na?" She hums. "There is a realm that calls me that, yes."

There is a realm...? I think my head is going to explode.

She reaches out. I'm not scared. I'm, somehow, relieved. Warmth radiates from her fingertip that traces around us, illuminating us with golden light. "Peculiar," she whispers. "Brother sent you to me for some reason."

"T-Tethros? The dark God?"

"Dark?" She tilts her head. "Do you fear him?"

"Isn't he someone to fear? He brought about the unborn and--" I bite my tongue. Soran is a vampire, but he has proven he isn't to fear, but with her eyes on me, I feel as if she sees right through me. As if she knows what I was about to say, as if she knows everything I've ever said.

"Unborn, vampires," she whispers, shutting her eyes for a moment in thought. When she speaks again, there is no sense of disappointment or anger in her voice, only facts. "My brother is kind and strong. Only he may control chaos so that it destroys in order for me to create. Mortals called upon chaos as they call upon light, but light is forgiving and chaos is not. They made their choice, just like my brother made his and I will respect his request."

Made a choice? Respect his request? I raise a brow at that.

"He is in great pain, I see that. So many souls that are meant to come to me. They're lost in the dark. This will upset the balance, so it seems, we must meddle once again."

"Again?" I whisper, entranced by the light pouring from her open palm that cascades around me.

"Our realms are many and they only grow. Even now, I neglect my children by speaking with you."

Oh, well, that makes me feel guilty.

"But I see now that it is time to intervene. Sometimes it is necessary. We give a helping hand should there be a threat to this cascading and upsetting the balance of all. Do make haste. This can only last so long."

"This?"

"The gift I am giving to you. It will be painful."

I don't understand how such warm light can be painful, but I think of Soran, alone. I recall his tears, the thought of never seeing him again, of failing him. I nod. "I can handle it."

"I know you can. Brother would not have spared you otherwise."

"Before I go, may I ask one thing?"

The light has faded, but I do not feel the pain she spoke of. I wonder if it is this place. When I return, I imagine it will hit me all at once.

"You may," she answers.

"Can...can a vampire be made mortal?"

She hums.

"You...you can see my memories, can't you?" I step towards her, forgetting that we are in the sky. The fear is gone, replaced with hope. "Soran...his name is Soran. He did not choose darkness. It was forced upon him. He doesn't want it. He doesn't deserve that pain so...can-can he cast it away and become mortal?"

I pray she answers. Funny that I'm praying to her. It's what I've been taught my whole life. I wonder if she hears it. Has she always heard? Does she care?

"Please," I whimper. "There...there has to be a way. He-he wants to join his family with you. You have them, right? Kailyn, Lamaria, Josette, Jeyton and Annalee. He lost them all, but if there is this world!" I wave to the beauty around us. "Then the afterlife is real too, right? He can see them again?"

I pray and pray and pray until my headaches.

Until she smiles.

✝✝✝

Prepare yourselves cause there will only be 4 more updates till the end. If you're in need of binging something else, season 2 of Speak the Truth finished up Monday on Tapas (with 5 extra's dropping in a few days cause I'm nice like that) so you can check that out! :) Left an external link if you're interested! This moment is one of the biggest changes

from my original plans for the novel lol anyways, holy shiiiiit, Wallie met Aena! What do you think of what she said concerning lumen and vilis? What's going to happen when Wallie is sent back?

✝Eighty-Six✝

Third Person P.O.V.

Vashna burns. A once golden castle is cast in the orange-red of flames. Streets are stained with ash. Corpses litter the city. The pungent scent of smoke and copper permeate the air. Every breath tastes of fear and death. Crackling of fire and pained screams echo over the dying city. Knights and priests battle against the dark magic of the unborn. An apocalyptic sight, much to Quelen's pleasure.

He watches on from the solemn, dead space of cold gray and flashes of red lightning. The portal grows, hissing and crackling with a silent threat. The sky is stained black, like too much ink on thin paper. Through the chaos, he overhears Soran's pained growls, a mix of sorrow and anger and frustration. He struggles to even crawl.

"You should have been prepared for this." Quelen presses the heel of his foot against Soran's spine. There's a harsh crunch. He snarls, visceral hatred in the very sound. "Wallie's death was inevitable. The death of all you care about is inevitable. Haven't you learned that already?"

Soran tears into the charred earth. His tears darken the ash that soon stains his face. He doesn't move. Doesn't fight back. Doesn't say a word. All hope is gone. He lays there, clueless as to what to do but, most importantly, not wanting to try ever again.

"Strange to see you so quiet," says Quelen. "What's wrong? You really have nothing to say?"

"Weak." Quelen retreats, holding out his arms to show off the falling city. "Not much longer now. Soon Vashna will fall and a new age of vampires will rise. You should be honored to witness--"

The portal shrieks. Red lightning clashes with blinding white beams that cut through smoke and flames. Clouds open up. Wind picks up around the

portal, exuding waves of warmth. Ash and soot blow up into a storm until the visibility is gone. There are only shadows moving within the cloud of ash that suddenly stills, as if time itself had stopped.

Then it expands, shielding the circle and the portal so that there aren't even sounds from the city. They cough the ash from their lungs. They blink away the dirt. Standing at the edge of the portal is a brilliant golden light that dims, revealing the silhouette of a man and then Wallie himself.

"How...?" Quelen whispers. Soran stares, wide-eyed and confused.

Once blue eyes are pure gold. The veins beneath Wallie's skin pulse with every heartbeat. There's lumen flowing through his veins. An infinite amount that literally seeps from his body. Every step he takes leaves life in his wake; grass sprouting from once dead ground and flowers blooming in an instant.

"You should be dead," Quelen snarls. He swiftly grabs Soran by the throat, but Wallie is there in an instant. He buries his foot into Quelen's gut. He's sent hurtling through the air. His back cracks against the shield that doesn't even rattle in response.

"Wallie," Soran whispers, slumped over in his arms. He throws a hand over his mouth. The hunger is building like never before. Lumen spilling from Wallie's form is calling to Soran, like a moth to the flame. He bites into his own hand. He can't even relish in Wallie's survival.

"Sorry, I don't really--" Wallie presses his palm against his temple. His voice is like a drum, reverberating on the air. Wallie shakes. He's stiff, as if every joint has been cemented over and he's struggling to break through to move. "It's there but not," he adds.

Confused, Soran asks, "What's...there?"

"Everything."

Soran doesn't understand. He doesn't have the time to ask either. Quelen is on the move. Thunderous dark clouds loom around his fierce figure. Much

like Soran when attacking Allvar, Quelen morphs into an estranged beast. Long, skeletal limbs, red eyes, twisted horns over a hunched and spiked back. Through the dark, only his silhouette can be made out. Red lightning spark from the storm, catching fire and scarring the ground.

"I don't know what game you two are playing, but it's futile!" Quelen cries.

Blistering currents of wind cut through the ground like swords, heading their way. Wallie casts a blinding shield that buzzes with the sound of hornets or wasps. Quelen's storm encircles them. Lightning cracks against the shield, red lights gleaming like fireworks. Wallie holds Soran close, muscles tense. This close, Soran notices Wallie's eyes twitching. His jaw is tense.

His strength has yet to return. Soran struggles to ask, "What's...going on?"

"Explain later. No time. Trust me."

Wallie sits Soran aside. He tries to keep hold of Wallie's wrist. Smiling, he steps away, repeating, "Trust me."

"Trust..." Soran shakes his head. "I-Isn't the issue."

Wallie frowns, but they don't have time. He kisses Soran's hand then exits the shield that lessens until it's a ball of light shielding Soran from the wrath outside. The storm has worsened. Kicking up winds that would knock most from their feet. Wallie stands firm, listening intently to Quelen's movements in the dark. Even with his size, his steps are swift and quiet. Left. Right. Above. Behind. In front.

Wallie ducks when dark claws swipe at him. He can't explain the power gifted to him, it's simply there. He knows how to do it, all the information is there. He curls in on himself, light twisting around him to explosive proportions, cutting through the dark. Quelen howls, his eyes blinded from the light.

Wallie charges. A spear forms in his grasp. He impales Quelen through the abdomen. A harsh cry rings in the air. Quelen shatters the spear, tossing

Wallie aside. He slides across the ground, narrowly grasping his footing before falling into the portal. Although quiet, the portal remains a threat. One Wallie has to use.

"Power or not, you're not a warrior, Wallie," Quelen threatens through the night. A night so dark that it's a limitless void. Even the ground beneath is inky black, an eternal dark sky.

"What do you plan to do? Kill me?" Quelen chuckles. "I won't deny the strength in you. I'm curious where it's from, but it isn't yours. You will never fully utilize it."

Flames seethe forth from the darkness. Wallie narrowly evades. More follow from all angles, converging around him. He shields himself, hissing from not only the heat outside but within as well. His muscles ache. He doesn't know how much time he has. Based on how he feels, it isn't much longer.

"I don't need to fully utilize it," Wallie answers. "I just need enough to do what needs to be done."

"Oh, so brave now."

Quelen tackles Wallie to the ground. He hits so roughly that the earth cracks. Bones too. He howls, feeling them snap then mend back into place. He wonders if this is what Soran has always felt. He doesn't think he could ever tolerate such pain. And he doesn't want to think of Soran tolerating it any longer. The pain furthers his resolve.

Claws dig into Wallie's side. Spheres form in his hands. Beams fire above, cutting through Quelen's arm, which drops with a spray of blood.

"Damn it!" Quelen disappears into the darkness once more.

Wallie's wounds heal in an instant. Shining strings thin as needles and as sharp as blades form in his grasp. He swipes them through the storm. They cut through the ground, hissing with every crack of the whip. There's a

spark, casting flames that breathe even with the smothering storm. Quelen's form is visible, dodging the attacks.

Then he's on the offensive. Chains erupt from the ground, twisting around Wallie's ankles. He shatters them. Not in time to dodge Quelen though. They fall to the ground with Quelen digging his fangs into Wallie's throat. Pain rattles him to the bone, but Quelen made a grave mistake. He's so drunk on the overflowing lumen that he doesn't react to Wallie twisting the beams of light around his abdomen, then his throat.

When the beams tighten until he bleeds, Quelen finally rears back, voice actually slurred, "W-What?"

Using the shock, Wallie gets them both to their feet. Quelen stumbles, struggling in the beams grasp. Vilis taints the light, turning it a dim purple, but it's too late. The portal breathes deep, as if it knows what's to come. Wallie shoves with all his might, sending Quelen into the dark. The chains shatter in time for Quelen to dig his talons into Wallie's arm.

"If I'm going, you're coming with me!" He bellows.

Wallie drops; half his body dangles in the darkness alongside Quelen. The current has them both slipping further in. The portal has a mind of it's own. Twisted hands of deep violet grasp Quelen's ankles. There are voices on the air, screams that frighten even Quelen. He practically pulls the flesh from Wallie's arm.

"Let go!" Wallie whimpers, uncertain of what to do. The power is fading and he needs enough for one last thing. His grip on the edge falters. Eyes wide, fearful, blood running cold, Wallie falls. But someone grasps his waist, tugging him back to solid ground.

Quelen grunts when Soran's fist meets his face with a violent snap. His grip loosens. Wallie pulls free. They watch as Quelen is dragged into the dark, disappearing with a strangled curse and pained screams.

✝✝✝

Wallie has come to save the day! What an adorable badass :D Is this really the end to Quelen? What's going to happen next?!

✝Eighty-Seven✝

The current worsens, nearly sucking Wallie and Soran in too. They stumble away holding each other. The shield around them shatters like broken glass, revealing Vashna. A flash of light from the portal extinguishes the flames of the city. Dark clouds over the sky are dragged into the vortex. Unborn scream among the streets as the vilis is literally sucked out of them, leaving their husks on the ground.

"Soran!" Wallie calls, glancing to his hands. The light is leaving him, being taken with the rest. "Soran, listen, I can make you human!"

Soran stiffens. Eyes wide. Un-breathing and pale as snow.

"Do you want that?" Wallie frantically looks between the closing portal and Soran. He gives a sad smile. "I wish you had more time to think about it, but it's now or never!"

He takes Soran's trembling hands. "What do you want?!"

Soran wouldn't need time even if they could take it. What he has always wanted can now be given. There's only a brief moment, one where he asks himself if he's worthy, if this is a chance he is allowed to take. Is he not a monster? Is he not deserving of this fate?

But the hope remains, the one that pushes through the dark thoughts.

"I want..." Soran whimpers, uncertainty twists in his mind, but still, he desperately nods. "I want to be human!"

Wallie smiles; the last sight Soran sees before the same bright light from earlier appears. Warmth encircles him, courses through his veins. There's a warm prick, hot needles in his veins then they sooth. He feels it, vilis leaving him to join the rest, disappearing into an endless void that he always felt was once within him. Something familiar yet always at a distant settles. There's an overwhelming sense of comfort.

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When he next opens his eyes, Wallie is in his arms, laying among the debris of Vashna under a clear night sky. He heaves a breath like none before. His eyes struggle to focus. Sounds are dull. The taste of ash is strong. Wallie rests in his arms, but when he looks at him, it's different. There's no hunger, no sense of lumen and the constant, insatiable need to consume. Then his stomach growls, a twisting pain and he smacks his dry lips together.

"Soran? A-Are you...alright?" Wallie lifts his head. He presses his hands to Soran's cheeks. "Your eyes!"

"My eyes?" He croaks when sitting up. Exhaustion settles in his bones like he's never felt before.

Wallie peers about then points to a nearby shop with a shattered mirror leaning against the broken walls. "Look!" he exclaims.

Soran tries to focus, finding that his sight isn't what it once was. The reflection staring back at him is somehow familiar, but not. The wounds are gone, but once searing blood red eyes are now a warm burgundy. Once pale skin like snow has warmed, rosey cheeks, rounded ears and no fangs.

Soran pokes at his own face then looks at Wallie. For the first time, he doesn't notice the lumen or crave for it like a rabid dog. He senses it, the warm light, but that's it. He's thirsty, but it's not the same. He's hungry, but it's not the same. He's tired, but it's not the same.

"I'm human," he whimpers, dragging Wallie in for a kiss and another and another. Each one desperate and grateful all at once. He cradles Wallie like a gem; feeling his own sore muscles bark back at him. He never thought he'd be so grateful towards feeling pain.

"I'm human," he repeats as if Wallie needs to hear it.

Wallie sighs in relief, combing Soran's hair. "And you're...really ok with that?"
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"Bit late to ask now."

They separate. Wallie caresses his cheeks. They're warm. He peers into his eyes, noting the red encircling his irises, just a little of what they once were. And yet they're just as enticing, just as strong, if not more so because there's hope and love and wonder and relief like no other.

"So..." Wallie whispers, resting his forehead against Soran's. "Do you want to grow old together, Soran?"

Soran has never wanted anything more, but he's hesitant. "Do you think we can?" He grips the fabric of Wallie's torn shirt. "Without my powers, we can't risk staying here."

"Then we leave."

"Leave?"

"Go wherever we want." Wallie laughs. "I grew up a farmer, remember?" He pinches Soran's cheeks, who pouts in response. "I guess it's my turn to provide for you, although I admit it won't be nearly as luxurious."

"A life with you is all the luxury I could ever want."

Wallie blushes. More so when Soran brushes their noses together. A simple, intimate act in the middle of chaos that makes all the tension fade.

"You have a lot of explaining to do though," he says, causing Wallie to sheepishly smile.

"You may not believe me."

"After what happened today, I think I will." Soran cradles Wallie's neck, loving that he can do so without a single thought of feeding. "I'm wondering if this is even real."

"It is. It really is." Wallie wraps his arms around Soran, pulling him in for a kiss.

Someone suddenly clears their throat. "Uh...sorry to interrupt."

They both pull away fast, staring wide-eyed at Silva. She's haggard, tired eyes and bruised. She wields a sword in her hand, dirtied with blood, as is her uniform. She's alone though, alone and clearly confused. She specifically eyes Soran then Wallie then the battleground around them.

"I don't think I will believe anything you tell me about what just happened," she says, gesturing to the whole mess.

Wallie nervously nods. "It's...a pretty unbelievable story."

"Yes." She looks at the very obviously different Soran. "Very unbelievable."

Groaning, Soran stands, guiding Wallie to do the same. He shields him. Wallie links their hands. Soran attempts to sound intimidating when asking, "Is there going to be a problem, Grand Knight?"

Silva crosses her arms, peering about the area. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, mulling over that question until, finally, she groans, "Problem? Suppose there is. We have a ruined city, uncertain how many dead citizens and no king--"

Soran smiles.

"Pretend to be a little sad," she grunts.

"Was it painful?"

Wallie elbows Soran, who grunts but continues to smile.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. Anyway--" Silva claps her hands then places them on her hips. "There is some good news though, our vampire problem is solved."

Both Soran and Wallie eye her suspiciously.

"Moments after the assault we received word from the priests of Yvlacna that Karsissia is dead. Not sure how, only that her very essence vanished

and now--" Silva gestures to where the portal once was, now nothing more than a circle of charred dirt. "I will report the deaths of Wallace Jonessan and Soran Makai, two brave souls that cast Quelen Jakeen into the portal, but lost themselves in the process. A tragic but heroic tale, don't you agree?"

Soran nearly drops from confusion. Wallie chuckles while holding up his weight.

"I suggest you find some disguises though. And I suggest you get what you need and then be rid of whatever you don't want any to find from the estate." She gestures in the direction of the mansion. "Our forces are spread out, but the masses are near the castle and south side for evacuation so you can get there unseen if you're careful. I'm not saving your asses if you're caught though." Silva walks away. "I've done enough."

"Why?" Soran calls after her.

She faces them, alternating her attention between the two of them. "I saw the shield shatter." Now she focuses on Wallie. "I don't know what I saw. I don't know exactly what happened in there, but I know the two of you saved more than just the city, so, take this as my thanks, however--" She points accusingly at Soran. "I still fucking hate you."

"Trust that the feeling is mutual."

Silva walks away, allowing Wallie and Soran to sneak off as advised to do so. Scouring through the wreckage, they find fabric to shield their faces. With the citizens either evacuated, hiding, or dead, there is little to no one around to notice two figures sneaking to the Makai estate. It rests mostly untouched.

Soran hesitates at the doors.

"Is this what you want to do?" Wallie asks.

"We can't stay," he answers. He holds out his hand, peering at his nails that are no longer thick like claws. "I sense I can still wield lumen, but the

knowledge I hold of vilis remains. Many may still come after me, and you, unless they already think we're dead."

Wallie lowers his head.

"Don't feel bad. I want this. I want to look at a person as a person rather than a means to feed. I want to grow old. I want to taste sweets and spice. I want to speak to others without worry that they fear me. If that means giving this up then...then so be it."

"But this is your home, where the memories of your family are. You said yourself that when traveling you still came back."

"Don't worry." Soran smiles. "Wherever you are is home to me now."

"I love you, Soran," Wallie blurts out, flushing up to his ears. "I promise I'll make you happy for the rest of our lives."

"That's my line." Soran leans in for a kiss, cradling Wallie's cheeks, brushing away the tears after. They rest their foreheads together. "I love you too, Wallie. The love I planned to give to you for eternity, I will give it all in the time that we have left."

"Don't worry about eternity." Wallie's eyes gleam like stars in the night. "We'll still have our forever, Soran, I promise."

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That night, the Makai estate burned to the ground. No longer the stain over Vashna, although, when word spread of what the so-called monstrous Lord Makai had done, people actually started to miss it. And perhaps, some began to suspect he wasn't so monstrous after all.

✝✝✝

IMPORTANT! There are actually two updates after this, but I'll post them both on Saturday for the finale. I accidentally scheduled the episodes wrong so good thing I checked o.o
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So...SORAN IS MORTAL! They've defeated Quelen, the Unborn, and even are leaving Vashna to live free! What do you think of that? :D If you want, you can start leaving questions for the Q&A or wait until the final two updates ^^

✝Eighty-Eight✝

Wallie P.O.V.

Four Months Later

There's a cottage on a hilltop with a pond and swings. A vegetable garden rests around the back. There's a small dock with a boat to catch fish from the pond. It's the last house at the end of a long dirt road, perched quietly among high green grass and encircled by towering trees. Ivy and flowers twist around the wooden railings of the front porch that creaks under my weight. Noise comes from within and the scent of something burning.

"Soran," I call, pushing open the door with a chuckle. "Are you trying to cook again?"

I'm not surprised to find the culprit of our burnt dinner standing over the stove with a scowl. He pokes at the bubbling pot that is casting smoke in the kitchen. Luckily the windows are open, allowing it to slowly trickle outside. Malatis isn't so lucky though. He has determined it's safer to be in the backyard, frolicking in the grass rather than risk losing his sense of smell.

"I don't know if I'll ever get the hang of this," Soran grumbles, stepping away without me having to say a word. He pouts, his deep burgundy eyes narrowing on the enemy; the stove.

"Not like you ever had to worry much about the taste of food before. It's understandable you haven't caught on yet." I hold up the bag I got from the market that contains our dinner. It's always safest to buy a meal when Soran promises to cook.

He snatches the bag from my grasp. "I don't know if I should be angry that you trust me so little or proud that you know me so well."

"Mm, a bit of both!"

Soran rolls his eyes when setting the table. When he sits down, back pressing against the chair, he hisses.

"Something wrong?" I ask, coming over with our drinks.

"My back stings."

I raise a brow at that, leaning over to pull up his shirt. His skin is blistering red. "You're sunburnt! I told you not to stay out all day in the garden." I tug on his shirt, instructing him to take it off. He does so, hissing all the while. "You don't heal in the blink of an eye anymore."

"I know."

"So you need to be more careful and consider your condition!"

Soran nods.

"I bet you didn't wear gloves either. Do you have blisters too?!"

He tries to hide his hands under the table. I grab his wrists, holding them up to see that, yes, he has blisters. His nails are cracked, arms equally as red as his back. He was either ignoring the pain or expecting to heal himself up later.

"Soran-"

"I get it." He holds up his hands in surrender. "No need to nag."

"I don't nag."

"Yes you do." He smiles, switching the hold so that he's gripping my wrist. My cheeks heat up when he pulls me in, pressing a swift kiss to my lips. "I don't really mind though."

"H-Huh?"

"When you nag. I like it," he purrs.

I'm tempted to argue some more that I don't nag, but we both know it's a lie. I can't help it though. It's only been four months since Soran has become mortal. Teaching someone their limitations when they had gone their entire unnaturally long life without any is strenuous.

I still remember the first dinner we had; the first taste of food. The actual taste of food that he had been deprived of his whole life resulted in the wide-eyed giddiness of a child. I had never seen someone cry while eating, but I didn't interrupt him. He got sick afterwards though so we both learned our lesson from there. Another instance he grabbed a teapot from on top of the stove, burning the palm of his hand. I was a little concerned that he smiled, but I guess seeing his body react in the ways a person's should made the pain bearable.

And now here he is, sunburned and blistered from learning to garden and being too stubborn to stop when he's in pain. He simply doesn't recognize pain or fatigue as an issue because he expects his body to keep up. While he does have an unusual amount of lumen and can easily heal himself, I don't exactly want him to always rely on that. He's human now. He has to learn what that means.

So yeah, I guess I do nag sometimes.

"The burn is pretty bad." I sigh while inspecting his back, which has the worst of it. His face seems relatively fine so he probably at least wore a hat. "Heal yourself up before we eat-" I point accusingly at him. "But don't do this all the time. When something hurts, let me know or stop, got it?"

"Yes, Dear."

I smack him over the back of the head for that. "Smart ass."

Soran closes his eyes after a warm chuckle. I sit down, watching the golden light hum to life, so drastically different from the dark mass I saw against Allvar. Different, yet the same in the sense that I'm not fearful of him or the power that is seemingly endless even now. I know that isn't the case. He has limits, unlike before, but I guess I'm a little biased to think that he can get through anything. He already has, if you ask me.

"Done," he says afterwards. We both chuckle when his stomach angrily growls.

"Remember to breathe," I tease while he shovels a few spoonfuls into his mouth. He has gotten better, but he's like a kid sometimes. I cut him some slack though since I can't imagine what it's like not to have basically any taste. He wants to try everything, even when I warn him it's too sweet or too spicy. Doesn't matter. He wants to give it a go.

Even now, we've eaten from this same small family owned restaurant probably ten times since we've settled down here. Every visit I get him something different and he eats just as happily, swaying or humming in his seat. He really does appreciate the simplest of things now. He loves going into town too, loves being able to step into a shop or smile at someone that walks by without them cowering in fear or cursing behind his back. He's already made friends with the neighbors and the local school has been asking if he'd be interested in taking up a teaching position. We've talked about it. I think he'll cave in soon.

"What?" Soran suddenly asks, wiping at his face with the back of his hand. "Is there something on my face?"

"No. It's just fun to watch you eat."

"That is an odd pass time to have."

I kick him under the table. "You know what I mean."

Soran hums. He pokes at the food on his plate that is already nearly finished. His eyes dim when he says, "It is odd."

"Hmm?"

He looks out the window. "The silence." He takes my hand in his, tracing his fingers over the veins of my wrist. "Not being starved."

"There are quite a few perks to being mortal," I say with a smile that he mirrors. "I imagine enhanced smell isn't something you miss."

"Nope."

"Or enhanced hearing."

He shakes his head.

"Stamina?"

"You already know that hasn't suffered." He leans in with a devilish grin. "Or do you need to be reminded?"

I take a drink to cool my heated cheeks. Soran's eyebrows wiggle when I am foolish enough to glance his way again. Clearing my throat, I pretend like he never said that, and I didn't walk right into it, by saying, "I've hired some people to help set up the fencing. They'll be here in two days."

Soran retreats, but his eyes tell me that I will be "reminded" this evening even if I never responded. He crosses his arms when asking, "And the barn?"

"That'll be in two weeks?" I scratch the back of my neck.

"Are you sure about it?"

"What?"

"Having a farm." He rests his arms against the table, tilting his head curiously. "We don't have to work. We grabbed enough from..."

He always hesitates when bringing up the estate or anything to do with Vashna, although I know he doesn't regret our decision. Neither do I.

"We have enough," he says. "Enough to last a lifetime."

Neither of us are entirely certain what life is like in Vashna with him gone. Soran had to have a will, even if he never was meant to die. All his wealth and businesses were meant to be split among the staff working at the estate during his passing. The estate itself was also meant to be passed on, but we

burned it to the ground, all the information on vilis in Soran's basement with it.

In other words, all my co-workers are likely filthy rich business owners by now. I wonder how they are, wonder if they even think about us, but we can't risk getting in contact. Soran and I simply wanted to leave, disappear into the countryside and live comfortable lives.

Surprisingly enough, the country of Leschandeal has become our safe haven. With most of the Baylor's dead, there is a new queen on the throne, a cousin or something. She's seemingly disinterested in vilis. She is caring for the people, as she would. Leschandeal has been quiet as well, happy that the world has been "cleansed" of vampires. Although some continue not to believe they're all dead, neither of us have had any reason to be seriously worried. It's quiet here. Peaceful. A place we can grow old together.

"That doesn't mean we should be bums," I argue.

Soran gestures to the backdoor. "We have a garden."

"So you don't want a farm?" I smirk when he starts to pout.

"I never said that, but I am making it clear that you can change your mind."

"I won't. I want horses and chickens-"

"Chickens to eat?" He yelps when I smack his arm.

"No, for eggs! I'm not killing the chickens!"

"You just ate chicken." He points to my plate. I'm ten seconds away from kicking him when he gestures towards the back door where Malatis is to suggest, "Besides, I'm sure Malatis would be more than happy to do that job for you."

Malatis pokes his head in from the open backdoor with a wriggling fish in his jaws. He skips over, laying at Soran's feet with his dinner.

"No, stop! We're having cute chickens clucking around the yard and neither of you will touch them!" I point to Malatis. "And take that outside to eat!"

I'm ignored as he takes a massive bite. There's a mess on the floor that I will not be cleaning up. That's Soran's job, but all he does is laugh. Suppose some things will never change.

"But what about to get to the eggs?" Soran continues. "What if I need to move a hen to get to the eggs?"

"Stop being a smart ass or you're sleeping on the couch," I warn. I wish I'd stop smiling though because it isn't much of a threat.

He shrugs then, the rotten bastard, takes a drink prior to saying, "Personally, I'd prefer having children in the yard."

I choke. On what? No clue, but I'm choking.

He smirks when I cough out, "W-What?"

"Kids." He slips his fingers between my own. I feel the cool metal of his ring against my burning fingers and wonder if he is focused on mine as well. "When the farm is finished, when we've fixed up the house a bit more, let's adopt."

"How are we going to do that? We're both dead, remember?"

"We'll figure it out." He tilts his head. "Or you don't want to?"

My voice refuses to function, or maybe it's my mouth. Both appear to be wanting to reply, but the most I get out is a gurgled sound that has Soran chuckling. He squeezes my hand, waiting patiently for my answer that should be obvious, although, I guess, like I wanted to hear him say it, he wants to hear my answer too.

I've always wanted kids eventually. Being with Soran, in the beginning, I wasn't so sure we'd have any. He has already lost so many and I couldn't imagine asking him to watch me grow old and pass on then our children afterwards. Even if our family continued on for generations, he'd have to

watch them all wither away while he remained. Now though...now we can have that life, living together, having kids, teaching them, watching them grow and possibly have families of their own, growing old together.

"Me too, I'd...I'd really like that," I finally laugh, letting Soran guide me from my chair to him. I slip into his lap, laughing more when he holds me tight, kissing at my neck then my cheeks then my lips.

"I love you," he says. He cradles my face in his hands, soothing over my cheeks when he presses his forehead to mine. "I will love you until the stars fade from the sky and the sun ceases to rise and the sea dries into ash."

"Sounds like forever."

"Until the end of time, and then long after."

"You better." I laugh. "Because I'll love you even longer than that."

He rolls his eyes, but seals our promise with a kiss.

✝✝✝

I'm going to be busy tomorrow so I updated this early. AAAAHHHH, YOU ADORABLE PIECES OF GARBAGE! But yay, our boys are happy together WITH MALATIS TOO! And they're going to have a family and have all the happiness they deserve >.< *gives tissues* You're gonna need these--for a good reason!

✝End✝

~Epilogue~

Soran P.O.V.

I'm tired.

The room is a blur. My breathing is slow. My hands tremble. Then there's something warm. Soft patting against the back of my hand. Blue, a familiar deep blue watching me from the side of the bed. Wallie. He smiles, wrinkles etched into aged skin and gray hairs curled around his head. I smile back, but he's shaking too. I hear someone sniffle.

"Is he in pain?" Mykel asks.

I search for him. The bedroom I've spent decades in has faded. I don't recall where our dresser is or the closet or the boxes filled with memories of our family. Do we still have them? I'd like to look at them.

I find Mykel somewhere behind Wallie. I squint my eyes, trying to make out his tall figure looming over a man in white.

"No. I've administered the medicine, but..." He rests his hand on Mykel's shoulder. "You need to prepare yourselves. It'll be soon."

Haelyn is crying. Our daughter is crying. I reach for her, but she finds me. Her gentle hands cradle mine. The bed dips. She leans in, allowing me to make out her vibrant violet eyes and short graying black hair.

"I'm here, Papa," she says. I don't remember calling for her. I don't remember getting here. Wasn't I at the hospital? My memory is hazy.

"Would-" she sniffles. "Would he have more time if we take him back to the hospital?"

"He doesn't want-" Mykel stops himself, but he's closer now too. I smile at him, although his deep green eyes are clouded over with tears. "He hated it there and he should be here when-" He chokes up when Wallie takes his hand. "He should just be here."

"Where are the kiddo's?" I ask, although they aren't really kiddo's anymore, not all of them anyways. My voice is harsh and cracked. I don't even remember what I sounded like before this, before growing old. "I want, mm, I promised to read to them."

"Is it ok to bring them up here, Daddy?" Haelyn whispers, but she has never been much of a whisperer. She always tried to stay up past her bedtime with her brother. Mykel could get away with it, but not her. She's loud wherever she goes and whatever she does. I'd catch her playing with toys under the covers or trying to sneak outside to swing. Then we'd play or swing together and eat snacks, unless Wallie caught us both. The memories warm me when I'm starting to feel very cold.

"Yes, let them see each other just..." Wallie looks at me. Even now, he holds a smile. "Just in case."

Haelyn nods. She and Mykel leave the room. I hear our grandchildren talking outside. I hear their rushed footsteps growing closer. I remember Haelyn and Mykel doing the same, waking on their birthdays or early for a promised trip. They'd come running into our room, jumping on the bed, shouting at us to get up because it's time to go. And we'd laugh and have pancakes for breakfast and go on adventures in the woods, swimming in the pond, riding the horses or chasing the chickens.

The door opens. All seven of our grandchildren crowd around the bed. Iris is the youngest, turning 12 this year. She crawls to my open arms.

"Iris," Greta, Haelyn's wife, calls, but stops when I cradle Iris in my grasp. My hands won't stop shaking. Once I could braid her hair and I did. I'd braid her hair or put it up in pigtails or sit patiently while she painted my nails, whatever she or the kids wanted. Now, I can't really do that anymore.

Haelyn leaves the room in silent tears. Greta follows while Mykel lingers in the doorway, trying his best not to break down in front of the kids. I was meant to tell them stories, but they're the ones telling me. They sit around the bed talking about school, friends, homework, except for Adryan. He's the eldest, Mykel's first and our first grandkid, long grown up and living a life of his own, and yet he looks so young to me right now.

And the only one that doesn't leave when Mykel and Haelyn finally insist that the kids head home. Wallie gives us some privacy, stepping out of the room to wish them goodbye while Adryan drops on the bed, gripping my hand like he did when I was first teaching him to swim. It makes me laugh.

"What?" he asks, somehow crying and laughing all at once.

"Do you remember...when I taught you to swim?"

"Not really something I want to think about," he answers, wiping his nose with the back of his sleeve. I doubt he'd be caught doing that in front of his siblings. He always tries to smile around them, to stay calm, because if he's calm then they are calm. The curse of the eldest, not to mention they wouldn't let him live it down, always having to taunt each other.

"You held my hand like this." I try to hold it up, but the strength has left my arms. My legs.

"Of course, I was scared." He sighs. "I am scared. Can't...can't we go back to the hospital?"

"Adryan."

"Or maybe even go to the capital? They have the best hospitals in the whole country!"

I tug on his hand.

"You can't go, Pappy," he whimpers, crying like he hasn't cried since he was a kid. He is the spitting image of Mykel, makes me wonder if Jeyton would have gotten to be as tall or as strong or as stubborn.

"You can't leave," he repeats like he thinks if he says it enough that it'll happen. Once it would have happened. It would have been me begging him, had life gone differently, but I don't regret my choice. Not even for a second. Not even when Malatis passed away two months ago, a rather big sign that, soon, my time would be up. Now is that time.

I wave for him to come closer. He does, resting beside me with his hands clinging to my shirt, something he also hasn't done since he was a kid.

"Just because you can't see me doesn't mean that I'm not here," I tell him the age old saying that only results in another hiccup. "I'll always be with you...tell me...will you ever not think of me when getting into a boat...or falling out of one?"

That at least gets a chuckle. I press a kiss to his temple. "I'll love you until the end of time, Adryan."

"I love you too, Pappy."

Wallie leans against his cane. The soft click of it catches Adryan's attention. He sits up, wiping away the tears when Wallie pats his back. He stands to hug Wallie, promising to return early in the morning. He looks at me with hope that I'll still be here in the morning. Then he's gone, following his mother and siblings home while Haelyn and Mykel whisper outside the door.

"They'll be asking you to move in with one of them soon," I tease. Wallie grunts as he slowly sits on the bed, setting his cane aside.

"Or move back in here," he chuckles. His hand finds mine again. "Are you still feeling alright?" he asks. "No pain?"

"None...I'm sorry that I'm leaving first."

"Don't be." He brushes the hair from my eyes. I can see more clearly, his silent tears and red cheeks. He's trying to be strong, like how I'm trying to be strong. "We'll see each other again. Just be patient." But he still whimpers even when he tries not to.

"This wasn't so bad after all."

"Hmm?" Wallie hums.

"Growing old together." I smile then whisper. "Not quite what you expected...when agreeing to be with your moody vampire boss, was it?"

He glances at the door. When neither of the kids come storming in asking what we mean about a vampire, we take that as meaning they didn't hear.

"I wasn't sure what I expected, but certainly not this," he whispers around a soft chuckle. "Do you ever think we should have told them?"

"About me?"

He nods.

"They may already know...quite odd to have filthy rich parents." A cough stings my chest. Wallie swiftly gets me water, helping me drink since I can't even sit up let alone hold a glass. He frowns when I continue to speak, my voice barely a whisper, "Passed down through the unknown family...may not have been...a believable lie."

Wallie chuckles, but that was what we told the kids and we planned to keep it that way. I think about all the history lessons I gave through my years as a teacher. The kids often poked around about my name being the same as the infamous vampire Soran Makai of Aberia. The vampire that supposedly died alongside Quelen, successfully snuffing out the species. Maybe they put some pieces together and never asked. We'll never know.

Wallie leans in to whisper, "Would be interesting to see how they'd react though. I think Mykel would actually faint if you gave any details."

I snort. "Aren't we too old...to be teasing our kids?"

"Never! What's the point of having kids if you can't tease them?"

"You've somehow grown more childish in your old age."

"That's rich coming from you." Wallie pats my leg. "Who was the one putting chili powder in Haelyn's soup only two weeks ago?"

I grin. "Couldn't miss-" Another cough rattles me, sending me into a fit where the kids burst into the room. Mykel is rubbing my back while Haelyn grabs a nearby rag. When I'm finished, Haelyn tries to wrap the rag up to hide the blood, but we all saw it.

"Why don't you rest, Papa?" She requests, helping Wallie make me more comfortable under the blankets. I'm shivering. I don't even remember when I started. My eyes are heavy. They have been the last few days. Something tells me tonight will be the last that I close them.

"You should rest too, Daddy," she insists, gripping Wallie's arm and pressing her chin atop his shoulder.

"I'll stay here." He kisses her forehead. "You two go lay down."

Mykel glances between the two of us. "Are you sure?"

"Go. I've taken care of your father up to now...I can take care of him tonight too."

Haelyn's lips are wet from tears when she kisses me goodnight. She lingers longer than usual then leaves the room rubbing at her eyes. Mykel isn't much different, holding my hand and refusing to let go until Wallie pats his arm. His sigh when he exits tells me that he's praying to whoever will listen that I'll still be here when he wakes up.

"Don't stay up all night," I say, causing Wallie to let out a sad chuckle. "You need rest...don't make yourself sick."

"You're the sick one, remember?"

"I'm not sick. I'm old."

He waves his hand dismissively. When pressing a kiss to the back of my hand, he sighs. His voice trembles, eyes downcast when he whispers, "I love you, Soran."

"I love you too."

Wallie stays with me through the night.

I don't know when my eyes close. I don't remember when the warmth of Wallie's hand fades. I don't recall pain or even fear.

Death doesn't seem so bad.

It's warm. Bright. Lights flash before my eyes, a kaleidoscope of colors until my mind goes numb. Then I drop. There's the scent of flowers; a garden. Soft petals brush against my skin. Then there's a crunching sound, like footsteps moving through the grass and a familiar voice, warm, inviting, one that brings tears to my eyes.

"Wake up, Soran." His voice sounds like a smile.

More footsteps follow. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. A loud purr follows a soft nudge to my arm. Then another voice speaks, one sweeter than honey.

"Uncle, we've missed you!"

I dare to open my eyes, to take in the afterlife I always hoped for, but was never sure existed. Now, I know it's real.

Their faces are blurred from tears, but I see their smiles and I feel my own.

"Sorry, I took so long," I cry, twisting my fingers into Malatis' fur then holding out my hand for Annalee's. I missed them. I missed them so much.

I don't have to miss them anymore.

"On the bright side," I whisper, pulling her into my embrace. "I have so many stories to tell you now."

✝The End✝

I am an emotional wreck, but I wanted my precious baby to see his family again while knowing the one left behind will see him again too.

THERE IS AN AFTERLIFE IN MY STORY BECAUSE I MADE IT SO! ETERNAL HAPPINESS FOR MY BABIES THAT DESERVE IT, AAAAAHHHH! I cried so much writing this, you have no idea! Anyways, I hope you enjoyed this mess of a journey. Leave any questions you have here for the Q&A. I will explain the original ending I had in mind for the story that caused some (a lot actually haha) of the story to be negated or changed so keep that in mind ^^

✝Q&A✝

Wallace (Wallie) Jonessan
Age: 22
Birthday: February 21
Height: 5'11

Soran Makai
Age: 1621
Birthday: August 2
Height: 6'2

I'm saving what the original ending was meant to be for last because the explanation is rather long lol Will there be a sequel?

Nope.

Will there be extra's?

I have no plans for any. Even if I change my mind, they'll only be available on my patreon.

How physically old did Soran look when becoming human, did he look in his 20's or maybe 40's?

Mid to late 20's is when Soran stopped aging as a vampire and he would have appeared as that when he became human.

In the afterlife, does Soran have the appearance of when he died old or does he appear as his younger self?

I imagine them as younger, thinking that their souls would take on the form of when they were the happiest in life. In Soran's case, it'd be when he appeared in his 30's, after becoming mortal, being with Wallie and adopting their kids.

How many years were Wallie and Soran together?

I imagined them both living into their late 80's to early 90's ^^ so let's say 65 to 70 years.

Is Wallie still alive? Is he going to die too?

Yeah and yeah, he's old so, y'know, that happens lol

How long after Soran passed does Wallie join him?

I imagined it'd only be a few years, maybe two or three. That tends to happen a lot with older couples that have been together for so long.

Does Wallie ever tell the kids about their vampire father?

No. Soran was obviously never proud of being a vampire and that life they both chose to leave behind. I don't think either would ever want to risk their kids being frightened or even feeling bad about their lineage. Wallie is definitely the one that tried to talk Soran into it from time to time, but Soran would have never felt fully comfortable.

Does Wallie have any fighting skills, like sword or dagger skills?

No. He learned basic defense from Soran, but never anything like that.

If Wallie had a familiar, what would it be?

I think he'd have some kind of dog lol He's like a big puppy! Familiars tend to be a combination of animals, but Wallie's would definitely have a dog-like personality, plus that'd be hilarious to see interact with Malatis!

Did Malatis ever grow used to Wallie and let him "give him all the pets" as well as listening to him or did he stay a rebellious feline towards him forever?

Malatis will always be a rebellious feline towards everyone but Soran, even their kids struggled to get Malatis in check. However, he certainly became more friendly, allowing the kids to ride on his back or play or give pets. He

always chose Soran over everyone else though, if given the choice lol **How would Soran match up skill wise with other humans now that he's mortal?**

If someone had attacked soon after he turned mortal, he would have failed miserably by overexerting himself. After getting accustomed to his mortal body and abilities, he'd still be able to handle himself far better than most seeing as he has 1600 years worth of knowledge and practice using magic, even if it wasn't always lumen.

What became Soran's favorite food and did he ever learn to cook?

Soran definitely likes sweets. It's one thing he could somewhat taste as a vampire, but when becoming mortal the taste was so strong and he became addicted. Definitely a cookie monster and, as for the cooking, no lol Wallie had to accept his fate as the designated cook.

Did Soran teach the kids any cool magic tricks?

If by cool magic tricks you mean how to use lumen then yes, he did. Their kids and grandkids have basic knowledge of magic, at least those that were interested. Wallie kept up with his training as well so he became quite an adept magician ^^

What kind of last name did they end up taking?

No idea, never thought about it lol

Since they had no real identity, how did they adopt?

This story doesn't take place in the modern age so that's easy. There was no database they could punch into or information saved online. All they needed was proof that they can take care of the kids, things like an address and place of work. Since they already had that, they just needed their fake last names and there ya go, adopt.

Did the chickens make it?

I like to think Malatis might have chomped on one or two, but ultimately, yes, most of the chickens survived lol **Where was Malatis when Quelen was causing catastrophe and how did they meet up afterwards?**

Just like when Malatis was injured and he went back to The Veil, the same thing happened when Soran was kidnapped. As explained when Malatis was first introduced, he can only be in this world through Soran. If Soran is weakened then Malatis goes back to The Veil. Soran summoned him back once he was capable of doing so.

When Wallie eventually goes to the afterlife, how will he (and eventually his family) get along with Soran's family?

I'm not entirely sure if you mean parents, like, how will Wallie's parents react to Soran, but in short, everyone will get along. The afterlife is essentially heaven where there is only comfort, no need for money or power, simply a place for loved ones to exist together in peace.

What happened to everyone back at the estate?

As explained in Ep. 91, Soran's wealth was left to the workers so everyone is filthy rich. I imagine some would abuse it and end up going bankrupt, but people like Layne, Higra and Hael will be living luxuriously until the end of their days.

What do Wallie's coworkers think? Do any of them still remember him?

They certainly were sad to hear of his fate, shocked and confused. They grieved, Hael more than the others since they were friends. I'd say most would have mostly forgotten him once they grew older though.

What did the letter say that Lord Movell left to Wallie in the earlier chapters?

Exactly as Wallie suspected, it was just an address to contact Movell if he changed his mind.

How is Lady Connte doing?

Same as usual lol doing her job as a knight. I'd say she's happier with the main line of Baylor's gone, not that she'd admit that.

Did Layne find his family in the end?

Yep! All safe and sound, now filthy rich lol

How did that terrible prince Cathen die?

Ripped apart by Unborn. They would have tried their hardest to get to the royals and kill off priests so Cathen was one of the first to meet his end ^^

What was your favorite and most difficult scene to write?

My favorite scene was probably when Soran and Wallie first met. When Soran ripped a guy's throat out and Wallie was just O_O *the hell did I get myself into?* I feel the start of this story is really strong and I thoroughly enjoy most of it. The most difficult scene is the entire ending xD Just Quelen's reveal, Wallie's battle, all the fight scenes are tough!

Will there ever be a physical copy for this?

No. It's a mess, I don't want to edit it lol and it's way too long for traditional publication. It'd end up being, like, over $20 on amazon because of how expensive it is to print.

What led to you becoming a writer?

Well, I started writing to vent my frustrations concerning my parents divorce when I was a kid. Sharing my stories online just started because I had no reason not to share. I never thought it'd lead anywhere because I never felt I was any good, but now I'd really like to make this my forever career ^^

When you started planning this book, how did you come up with lumen/vilis and the entire world?

Uh, I didn't have any planning prior to this book lol WMAM was a "straight out of my wit" type of story. I merely wanted a story about a butler and his moody vampire boss story and went from there. When it came to the magic system, once I introduced it I wanted it to focus on the idea of dark and light and how they aren't inherently evil, although humanity has made it as such. I like when stories express that it's more so people and their choices that make things good or evil rather than something simply is good or evil, if that makes sense.

What was the original ending meant to be? Why did you change it?

As you all know, I changed the ending and thus a lot of previous instances in the story were ruined. Originally, the Baylor's were going to be the ultimate villains. What Makes a Monster was meant to be a sort of "shits and giggles" story for me, not too many big plot twists, just a fun web novel about a lonely vampire archduke and his adorable butler.

Anyways, rather than Quelen opening a portal, it would have been the Baylor's (although how they got there would have been different.) Wallie would have still fallen in, but instead of losing his powers he would have kept them, thus making it so he and Soran would be immortal together. They would have fought back the Baylor's, yay, but then Karsissia would have tried to go after Wallie cause, y'know, limitless lumen. Soran would have figured out how to kill her. Quelen would have helped because he discovered the truth about his sister then SHABAM! Our boys are safe. The Baylor's and Karsissia are dead. Soran and Wallie are immortal lovers! Except that was *super fucking depressing* to me, like ***insanely depressing!***

Soran's character...it just didn't make sense that he would be happy with the both of them being immortal. He hates being immortal so why would he be happy with Wallie having to go through all that torment? Soran would have been even more depressed because people would come after them as they always have been. Wallie would also have to watch the ones he cares about wither and die. They wouldn't have kids because they know they'd just die, Soran would have felt AWFUL! And he never would have seen his family again so I got really unmotivated since, personally, immortality for them sounded depressing as hell to me, although I know almost everyone wanted

that. Unfortunately, love isn't like fairy tales. It cannot solve all our problems. If it could, the world would be a much better place.

Then one night I actually had a dream about Soran waking up in a garden with his family, unbelievably happy. When I woke up, I realized that in my story there is an afterlife so this is it. This is the ending Soran needs. Soran was always different than the other vampires so it made sense he could become mortal, but I wanted to make sure they were extra safe to live a life as humans, which is why I made Quelen the villain so we could kill off the other two vampires...also I got tired of the Baylor's being the bad guys cause it was so obvious xD

Anyways, so that is what happened! I know reading about a character you love dying isn't the norm, but I was so in love with this idea of finally reading from Soran's perspective when he has grown old, lived a happy life he always wanted and always believed would never have, then passed away to see those that he missed so dearly, and knowing that one day the family he left behind would join him so I think that is the happiest ending of all ^^ I hope you enjoyed the story even if it's a total mess lol ✝✝✝

It has been quite a long ride, 165k words to be exact X_X Can't believe y'all lasted this long lol What Makes a Monster was meant to be a break for me, something that I didn't put a crazy amount of work into so, admittedly, there isn't a lot of backstory or lore in the story other than what was necessary. Thanks so much for reading and supporting me! I love you guys! ^^

Here's a list of my other stories, make sure to check them out! ^^

Ongoing Free to Read Novel:

The Secrets of Lore Seymour (also with vampires!)

Completed Free to Read Novels:

He Who Will Be King
Invisible Boy
What Makes a Monster
Dear Caleb

Fools in Love
-K
14 Days
The Lonely Ones

Completed Paid Novels Available on Tapas:

Speak the Truth
Riddle Me This
Whisper Woods
The Not So Super Hero
The Antidote to Doubt
Save the Demon King
Reborn as the Villain's Lackey

Ongoing Comic Available on Tapas:

Speak the Truth (adapted from the novel)

Finished Comic Available on Tapas:

Love Algorithm

If you wanna stalk me on other sites, here ya go;
Tapas: Twoony
Twitter: Tw00ny
Instagram: twoonyreads
Patreon: Twoony

Since I post early chapters there and some had sex scenes, my account is marked 18+ so you can't search it. You have to use the external link I left here or simply type in www.patreon.com/Twoony **Thanks again everyone!**

✝Fan Art✝

Welcome to the fan art page where I post the wonderful artwork done by you guys! Thanks so much for giving so much of your time to the precious boys, I really appreciate it!

Soran by Wolfagon on Tapas!

Wallie & Soran by Selena on instagram

Soran by _byron_entwistle_ on instagram

If you make fan art for WMAM, feel free to message me! I'll share it here if you're ok with it :)

Merch Shop!

Hello, hello friends! BIG NEWS!!
(that I'll be posting all over the place so prepare yourselves lol)

Tapas has launched a merch shop for its creators!! AAAAHHHH!! SO EXCITING!! If you don't know what Tapas is, it's another great place to read web novels and comics, both free and pay to read. Check out tapas.io or download the tapas app. Anywho, this merch shop is not only a great way to help support creators on the platform, but also for all of you to indulge yourselves in some awesome goodies :D

Right now there may only be five designs available for Speak the Truth (an old novel of mine now adapted into a comic, only available on Tapas,) but that could change in the future. Remember how some of you read a funny or cute line and thought or commented, *"This should be on a t-shirt!"* Yeah, well, now it can be! Or even on a hoodie, sweat pants, a tote bag, who knows what else Tapas will make available. Obviously, the more you support, the more options there will be. You can leave suggestions below on what you'd like to see made available at my merch shop for not only Speak the Truth, but any of my stories--yes, including the free to read content, like What Makes a Monster. Pick out your favorite quotes or even leave a suggestion for art. I may be able to get it done! If you'd like to see what is currently available, head on over to my merch shop! I've left an external link and put the link below :)

Even if you may not like what I have available, there are plenty of other creators launching their stuff. You can look at Tapas' merch shop where everything is available in one place. I'll also leave the link below!

Thanks for all your support. This wouldn't have happened without you <3

https://tapas.io/merchshop/Twoony

https://tapas.io/merchshop